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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

A STUDY OF METAPHYSICAL ELEMENTS IN THE  
POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
OF MASTER OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

by

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a thesis entitled A Study of Metaphysical Elements in the Poetry of Emily Dickinson, submitted by Ruth Marie Hill in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.



## ABSTRACT

Chapter I reviews the essential qualities of metaphysical poetry and shows that Emily Dickinson's poetry is akin to the metaphysical styles of both the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. A characteristic element in such poetry is the dramatic tension which is produced by the use of strained metaphors and harsh rhythms.

Chapter II shows how Emily Dickinson's violent metaphors create tension. The startling disparity between the terms of a violent metaphor leads a reader to analyze them. Thus the conceit, by its dramatic nature, tends to make one react intellectually as well as emotionally to the poem.

Chapter III shows how Emily Dickinson's complex arrangements of perfect and imperfect rhymes add to the dramatic intensity of her poems.

Chapter IV studies the interplay between regular and irregular rhythms in Emily Dickinson's poetry, to show that dramatic contrast and greater suggestiveness are achieved by meaningful variations from a conventional pattern.

Chapter V examines the significance of all aspects of form in the total effect a poem conveys. Emily Dickinson is important as a forerunner of the modern metaphysical revival because she showed how form, imagery, rhythm and rhyme could be used as complementary devices for making a poem intense and evocative.



## INTRODUCTION

Today Emily Dickinson's position in the first rank of American poets is secure. She has been referred to as "our chief lyric poet,"<sup>1</sup> and her work has quietly attained the status of an American classic. An anthologist could no more leave her out of a collection than he could leave out Poe, or Emerson, or Whitman. This was not always true. The first volume of her poems, published in 1890 -- four years after her death -- was so undervalued, even by her sympathetic adviser, T.W. Higginson, that he hesitated to be named co-editor of this book. To his surprise, it was quickly bought up and has since become a collector's item. Her popularity grew through two more editions and then waned in the early years of the present century. By the 1930's, however, she was again being regarded as something of a sensation, and biographies, articles, and plays based on her life were appearing in quick succession. Since then a less impassioned and more scholarly attitude has prevailed. Her poems have survived all these vicissitudes and have proved their lasting quality. The respect in which they are held today, after years of study, is not the sort of adulation which is accorded to a passing wonder. Emily Dickinson has now assumed her rightful place among the greatest of American poets. Indeed, to some modern critics she is the greatest woman poet who ever wrote in English.

Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830 - 1886) lived all her life in the little town of Amherst, Massachusetts. Her family, prominent in



the life of the town, had the virtues of New England Puritans. As a child she attended Amherst Academy, which her grandfather had helped to found, and later spent one year at Mt. Holyoke Female Seminary in nearby South Hadley. In her youth she took an active part in the life of her home town, especially in the affairs of the college with which her family was always closely connected. Later she lived quietly at home, and in the last twenty-five years of her life gradually withdrew into retirement, avoiding contact with anyone but a very few intimate friends. Outwardly her life was uneventful.

Though she never sought the stimulation of sophisticated intellectual society, she was profoundly affected by association with a few literary friends, whom she regarded as her tutors or "preceptors." The first of these was Benjamin Newton, a law-student in her father 's office as well as a personal friend of the family. He not only introduced her to the wealth of contemporary literature, which was to become a life-long interest and source of inspiration, but also encouraged her poetic endeavors. Through him she came to know the Brontes and the Brownings, whom she admired ever after. The tragic early death of Newton profoundly shocked Emily Dickinson and interrupted her poetic activities for a time. "Death was as much of Mob as I could master--then," she wrote in a letter many years later.

The second great shaping influence in Emily Dickinson's poetic growth was her presumed love for a man whom she is known to have seen



only three times, the Reverend Charles Wadsworth of Philadelphia. He was one of the prominent ministers of the day, at the height of his career when she met him, universally respected, and happily married. While on a visit to Philadelphia in 1854 she heard him preach and was captivated by his oratory. Though there is not the slightest evidence of any scandalous "affair" between them, she did carry on a treasured correspondence with him, and it is believed that he was the inspiration for her great number of poignant love poems.

Her third important literary friend was the critic T. W. Higginson. Though he was not, like Wadsworth, the source of inspiration, he remained for years a sympathetic "preceptor," and private audience to whom she could entrust many of her poems for expert critical evaluation. A man of conventional tastes, he was unappreciative of her unusual style and discouraged her from trying to publish. Much as she respected his learned advice, she continued to write in her own distinctive idiom. It may be because of his influence that she kept most of her poems secret, even from her own family. When the extent of her poetry was discovered after her death, he agreed to act as co-editor of the first two series that were published.

Fame and recognition came posthumously and very slowly to Emily Dickinson. The first two volumes of her poems, edited by Higginson and Mabel Loomis Todd, appeared in 1890 and 1891. A third, edited by Mrs. Todd alone, came out in 1896. Later came The Single



Hound (1914), Further Poems (1929), a collection entitled Poems: Centenary Edition (1930), Unpublished Poems (1936), and Bolts of Melody (1945). Some of these contain many and important editorial emendations. The publication of Dickinson poems presents unusual difficulties, for some of them were left in semi-finished form, on odd scraps of paper with alternative readings in some places. It was not until 1955 that all of the author's known works were collected and published, complete with all variants, in one scholarly edition, The Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson.\*

Long before this definitive edition, however, Emily Dickinson had come into her own as one of America's greatest lyric poets. Her unusual style has come to be recognized as an expression of modern trends in poetic technique. Her 1,775 short poems represent an important body of poetry probing the eternal mysteries of life, death, nature, love, and eternity in penetrating, epigrammatic, and often truly memorable verses. Though she never left New England, she found a world in her own home and infinity in her own soul. Her poems are rich in the local color of Amherst, but their message is to the world. As one writer put it, "she was the most provincial of great poets, and the greatest of provincial poets."<sup>2</sup>

\* The numbering of all Emily Dickinson poems quoted in this thesis is that given in Johnson's edition.



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## Chapter I

### THE NATURE OF METAPHYSICAL POETRY

Emily Dickinson was an unwitting precursor of the metaphysical trend in modern poetry. Her stature as a poetic innovator of the first rank was not realized until the third decade of the twentieth century, though the first volume of her poems was published in 1890. That first publication was well received by the general reader but depreciated by the critics. The prosodic irregularities and odd figures of speech which give her verse its unique quality did not accord well with the prevailing fashions of Victorian poetry. Its fundamentally metaphysical quality was not fully appreciated until the revival of interest in the English seventeenth century metaphysical school began in the present century.

The common characteristics which link Emily Dickinson's poetry to that of the early metaphysical poets are certain qualities of metre and imagery. Rhythmically it is rough and irregular and has many deviations from the basic metre adopted for any poem. In its imagery it uses strange conceits which seem incongruous at first sight but, by their very strangeness, pique a reader into studying and analyzing their meaning. Verses using these devices were referred to in the seventeenth century as "strong lines."<sup>3</sup> Much has been written in



succeeding years about the merits or demerits of strong lines. No one, however, has pointed out that it is the inherently dramatic nature of metaphysical poetry that led Emily Dickinson and her predecessors of two centuries before to adopt similar techniques. The purpose of unmetrical rhythms and surprising metaphors was to create dramatic tension. This topic will be examined further in the chapters that follow.

When Emily Dickinson was composing her works, in the years from about 1858 to her death in 1886, the dominant mood in poetry was that of the dreamy, rather sentimental, Victorian romanticism. Its metres were smooth and conventional. Illustrative of this school are such well-known poems of Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott," "Locksley Hall," and "Tears, Idle Tears." In America at the same time Longfellow was popularizing this tradition with poems like "Evangeline," "The Song of Hiawatha," and "My Lost Youth." All these are marked by their adherence to an inherently sentimental tone. This mood is far removed from the dramatic tenseness and great freedom in the use of rhymes and rhythms that characterize Emily Dickinson's verse. Her stature as a poet rests in no small measure upon her having anticipated the break which twentieth century poets have made with the nineteenth century romantic tradition. Her style looks back to that of Donne and his followers and ahead to that of Ransom, Eliot, and their host of



modern imitators. She was one of the avant-garde of the contemporary rebellion against adherence to mechanical rules of metre and form.

To understand Emily Dickinson's role as a bridge between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, one needs to recall the history of the so-called "metaphysical school." The term was popularized by Dr. Samuel Johnson. In writing of the life of Abraham Cowley in his Lives of the Poets, he says that "about the beginning of the seventeenth century appeared a race of writers that may be termed the metaphysical poets."<sup>4</sup> He then examines their style and enunciates its distinctive qualities. The central points of his critique are contained in a few phrases which have become touchstones for all critical discussions of this way of poetry. Their wit, he says, consists in "a combination of dissimilar images or discovery of occult resemblances in things apparently unlike."<sup>5</sup> Further, "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together."<sup>6</sup> The metres, too, he found rough and unmelodious: "instead of writing poetry," he says, "they only wrote verses in which the modulation was so imperfect that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables."<sup>7</sup> Metaphysical poetry, then, stood indicted on two counts: unsuitability of imagery and roughness of rhythm. On this basis criticism has rested until comparatively recent times. Students have continued to be somewhat defensive in the face of such derogatory opinions



by so venerable an authority. Until modern times critics have been prone to look at metaphysical poetry through eyes to which novel effects were less important than conformity to neo-classical rules.

It was against this critical bias that Emily Dickinson struggled. In 1862, when she had already composed several hundred poems, she initiated a correspondence with the critic T.W. Higginson, to get a professional appraisal of her work. He criticized it for its roughness, as most literary scholars of the day would probably have done. They were not prepared to accept any marked deviations from the metres and forms with which the nineteenth century masters had accomplished such great things. Emily Dickinson's world was no more ready to accept her violent metaphors and jarring rhythms than Dr. Johnson's contemporaries were ready to accept those of the seventeenth century. Yet today both these revolts against classical tradition have come to be recognized as milestones on the way to liberating poetry from a stultifying adherence to arbitrary rules and restrictions.

What these traditionally-minded critics failed to appreciate was the real reason for the metaphysical poet's refusal to be bound by the customary verse-patterns. First of all, it must be recognized that a successful metaphysical poem is founded upon an idea in which some element of conflict is inherent. It is not an



idyllic description or a reminiscence in solitude, after the manner of Wordsworth. Nor is it a completely intellectual epitomizing of general truths that were "ne'er so well expressed," after the manner of Pope. Yet it contains something of both. The metaphysical poet feels keenly, as does the former, and thinks philosophically, as the latter does, and this duality is characteristic of his type of poetry. For example, when Donne says,

Goe, and catch a falling starre,

Get with child a mandrake roote,

he is giving passionate expression to his doubts about the faithfulness of women by saying that such fantastic quests are no more impossible than finding a woman who is really "true, and faire." The idea is highly emotional, yet expressed in witty, vivid language so as to appeal to the mind as well as to the emotions. Its combination of feeling with mental acrobatics creates the tension which is intrinsic in this kind of poetry.

Metaphysical poetry is not basically sentimental; that is, its purpose is not merely to evoke a mood. Feeling is aroused, but there is also an appeal to the intellect as a concomitant. As in drama, one reacts emotionally to the poem but intellectualizes it also. A reader's feeling is not only sensual, as is the pleasure of sweet tastes to the tongue or of pleasing sounds to the ear. One feels sorrow or shock at the deeds of Hamlet or



Macbeth or Othello, for example, but also philosophizes about them. It is the same with a metaphysical poem: one reacts to it emotionally and intellectually.

The dramatic effect of a strained metaphor is produced by the very incongruity of the things compared. Instead of marvelling at the aptness of the comparison, one is shocked by the discordance of its terms and immediately begins to think about them to determine their significance. When one sees how the apparent discords are reconciled, one appreciates the poem. But if the poet has failed to reconcile them, the reader is outraged, and feels that the conceit has been a failure. The shock has been produced for no sufficient dramatic purpose. That is the reason for the lack of success of some metaphysical poems.

The dramatic effect of the violent metaphors is reinforced by the metrical irregularities. This reinforcement is the true function of the "roughness" in metaphysical poetry. A sense of strain is felt when the accented and unaccented syllables do not fall regularly into the pattern which the poet has adopted. Because he does not have the satisfying sensation of being able to anticipate the arrangement of accents and length of lines, a reader is frustrated by the unexpected deviations. This contrast between basic patterns and free cadences is characteristic of Emily Dickinson and the seventeenth century metaphysicals as well as many of their modern followers.



The seventeenth century metaphysical poetry was the poetry of the great age of English drama: the age of Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster, and Shirley. They expressed themselves not in the measured terms of conventional poetry but in the living language and free rhythms of real life. Their wit lay in exploiting the most unlikely comparisons so as to attract attention to unexpected relationships and meanings. Hence their works have a rough integrity which is likely to offend the taste of those who prefer verse that conforms to traditional ideas of poetic diction and metrical regularity. On these grounds their most celebrated detractor was Dr. Samuel Johnson.

The striking resemblance between the poetic methods of Emily Dickinson and John Donne and his seventeenth century followers has already been pointed out.<sup>8</sup> It would be interesting to know just how much she was influenced by reading their works. Unfortunately, nothing definite can be known, apart from a few casual remarks in her letters. In one she quotes from Henry Vaughan. Her father's library is known to have contained "numberless small leather-bound editions of the early [i.e., seventeenth and eighteenth century] English poets."<sup>9</sup> In a letter to her literary friend T.W. Higginson she lists as one of her favorite writers Sir Thomas Browne, a contemporary of Donne's, whose prose style is considered to embody



many "metaphysical qualities."<sup>10</sup> It would seem logical to suppose, therefore, that she was not unfamiliar with her distant predecessors, though the extent of their direct influence cannot be precisely ascertained. Whether the similarity in their styles results from direct influence or the coincidence of original minds working out their similar theories in similar ways, it is sufficient to enable one to classify these poets as her spiritual kinsmen.

Whatever her debt to these predecessors, it is significant that Emily Dickinson did not really come into her own as a major poet until after the revival of interest in the early metaphysical poets. This interest was given great impetus by the publication in 1921 of T. S. Eliot's essay, "The Metaphysical Poets." Students of literature who re-examined the work of John Donne and his followers began to observe the affinities between it and the work of Emily Dickinson. Her originality was studied with fresh insight, and the true nature of her contribution to modern poetry came to be realized. In this work, Eliot and his contemporaries, who wrote of Donne, Herbert, Marvell, and Vaughan, were indirectly contributing to the justification of Emily Dickinson's original ventures away from the established modes of nineteenth century poetry.

This justification of her way of poetry began with H. J. C. Grierson's edition of John Donne in 1912. Since then there has



been a great deal of critical study and comment, the result of which has been a complete revaluation of the entire movement. Grierson points out that what poets of this tradition tried to do was to break through the prescribed patterns of poetic expression. They aimed to make verse "almost rhythmical prose, the rapid overflow of lines admitting hardly the semblance of pause."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, he explains that "this is the kind of effect Donne is always aiming at, alike in his satires and lyrics, bending and cracking metrical patterns to the rhetoric of direct and vehement thought."<sup>12</sup> So many examples of this irregularity could be quoted that one cannot account for them simply as variations to prevent monotony. The opening stanzas of two metaphysical poems, one by Donne and the other by Dickinson, will illustrate this cracking of metrical patterns:

(1) Send home my long strayd eyes to mee

Which (oh) too long have dwelt on thee;

Yet since there they have learn'd such ill,

Such forc'd fashions,

And false passions

That they be

Made by thee

Fit for no good sight, keep them still. (Donne: The Message)

(2) Just lost, when I was saved!

Just felt the world go by!

Just girt me for the onset with Eternity,



When breath blew back,

And on the other side

I heard recede the disappointed tide!

(Dickinson: Just Lost When I Was Saved ll. 1-6)

Both writers begin with a familiar iambic metre in the first two lines. But once the pattern is established, it is changed by varying the length of the line and by introducing unmetrical accented or unaccented syllables. An irregular rhythm is thereby made to contrast with the regularity of the opening lines, and the reader feels a sense of strain. That effect is what Grierson defended and Dr. Johnson condemned. It is what poets like Donne and Dickinson exploited and perfected until it became a characteristic device of style.

One of the great advances made by Emily Dickinson and later modern poets was the breaking away from such hidebound adherence to form as Johnson's counting of syllables in individual lines. Modern critics study larger units. Pierre Legouis, for example, maintains that Donne's apparent harshness will be seen to have a purpose when one considers the stanzas, "which are the real units."<sup>13</sup> This view is supported by T. S. Eliot, who says "verse is not a line by line matter, but a question of the whole poem."<sup>14</sup> What seems crude in a single line, when studied in isolation, may be seen to be a part of a unified whole when the entire stanza or poem is read. "In a perfect sonnet, what you admire is not so much the



author's skill in adapting himself to the pattern as the skill and power with which he makes the pattern comply with what he has to say."<sup>15</sup> This is exactly the virtue that Dr. Johnson failed to appreciate in metaphysical poetry. Later critics like Eliot, attuned to the freer cadences of modern poetry, have singled out this quality as one of the bonds between us and the generation immediately after Shakespeare. Today's poets owe a debt to Emily Dickinson as a link between them and their early models.

Like modern poets, she adapted the metre to her purpose, instead of accepting it as inviolable and adapting her words to it. Often the variations are made more pronounced by the dramatic accentuation of certain words that are crucial to the thought.<sup>16</sup> Many Dickinson poems seem to adhere to a regular rhythm, but the meaning is such as to emphasize certain words, thereby giving the lines the effect of the free movement of actual speech. The following for instance could be scanned as regular

Common Metre:

      /      /      /      /  
I never lost as much but twice  
      /      /      /  
And that was in the sod.

But when the lines are read for thought, the accents would be less regular:

      /                  /  
I never lost as much but twice  
      /                  /  
And that was in the sod.



The "wrenching of stress" which Dr. Johnson decried is thus made a deliberate device to increase the dramatic effectiveness of key words.

But failure to keep the accent is only one of two major charges brought against metaphysical poetry by prosodic conventionalists. Johnson accused Donne and his followers of the literary crime of having "yoked by violence together the most dissimilar images." Similarly, Emily Dickinson's critics have referred to her "gnomic imagery" and her "achieved intransigence."<sup>17</sup> Until well into the twentieth century the tradition of poetic diction has disposed many against the daring leap of thought and condensed suggestiveness in metaphysical poetry. The subsequent reaction in more recent years of the present century has led to a re-examination of the strained metaphor, not only in Donne, but also in Dickinson and other more recent poets.

The metaphysical conceit is by its very nature a dramatic figure; surprise and shock afford part of its method. It seeks to elaborate comparisons between widely and wildly different things purposely to create a feeling of tenseness: much the same feeling we get from watching the developing plot of a stage drama, when we feel the stresses and strains produced by the struggle between opposing forces. To produce this effect, the poet enforces a comparison where no natural similarity would seem to exist.



Thereby he produces a strained metaphor rather than a natural one. Having conceived this unnatural metaphor, he then enlarges upon it, and causes the reader to reflect upon its significance. Such is the purpose of Vaughan in "Man":

Man is the shuttle to whose winding quest

And passage through these looms

God ordain'd motion but ordained no rest.

Donne, likewise, in that famous figure of the twin compasses in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" makes an unusual comparison between a person and a familiar object, exacting from the comparison the most unexpected similarities which, by their very novelty, lead the reader to further thought. The same purpose motivates Emily Dickinson in her "gnomic imagery," which has caused so much comment. When we read, for example, that "Crisis is a hair," we are prompted to think how often a mere hair's breadth makes the difference between a good and a bad outcome. The strangeness of the figure shocks the reader at first but has the final effect of causing him to think and to analyze further.

The wealth of meaning which can be conveyed by a cleverly extended treatment of such a conceit can well be seen from a comparison of two love poems, one by Donne, the other by Dickinson. The Donne poem "The Good-Morrow" is one dealt with by Clay Hunt in Donne's Poetry,<sup>18</sup> where he gives a detailed exegesis of several



well-known poems:

I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I  
Did, till we loved? were we not weaned till then?  
But sucked on country pleasures, childishly?  
Or snorted we in the Seven Sleepers' den?  
T'was so; but this, all pleasures fancies be.  
If ever any beauty I did see,  
Which I desired, and got, t'was but a dream of thee.

And now good morrow to our waking souls,  
Which watch not one another out of fear;  
For love, all love of other sights controls,  
And makes one little room an every where.  
Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,  
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears,  
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest,  
Where can we find two better hemispheres  
Without sharp North, without declining West?  
Whatever dies was not mixed equally;  
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
Love so alike, that none do slacken none can die.



This poem makes use of many of the conventional conceits of the Petrarchan love poems popular in the early seventeenth century. But, as Hunt points out, "Here Donne is only incidentally concerned with producing effects of surprise by playing off his originality against the expectations of the conventional reader."<sup>19</sup> Though the whole appears at first glance no more than a traditional aubade, it is really an ingenious working-out of Donne's idea of Platonic love.

The opening stanza shows two lovers awakening after their first true love experience and realizing that all previous affairs either one may have had were only "fancies." All the speaker's former ladies, he now realizes, were but "dreams of thee." In the beginning of the second stanza we now see that the "good morrow to our waking souls" has, besides its literal meaning, the implication that he has awakened to the truth that this love is not like any other. Then follows the conceit in which geographic discoveries are compared to casual affairs of those who have not yet found their true loves; he has his "world." Man was, in late medieval philosophy, a microcosm, and, in possessing his love, he has his "world"; the word is, therefore, well lost for love. Thus is suggested the idea that this love is more than sensual: it is Platonic, spiritual, permanent, for now he is willing to leave to other "sea-discoverers" the pursuit of merely



sensual pleasure in love. The conceit in the last stanza is based on a complex medieval theory of the way in which an image impinging on one's eyeball is translated into the emotional response one makes to the image. The eyes of the two lovers are the two halves of one sphere ("One World") which signifies their union in genuine love, without the cruelty or coldness ("sharp North") or inconstancy ("declining West") of ordinary affairs.

The Dickinson poem also treats the question of love in a metaphysical way:

I gave myself to Him--  
And took Himself, for Pay,  
The solemn contract of a Life  
Was ratified, this way--  
  
The Wealth might disappoint--  
Myself a poorer prove  
Than this great Purchaser suspect,  
The Daily Own--of Love  
  
Depreciate the Vision  
But till the Merchant buy--  
Still Fable--in the Isles of Spice--  
The subtle Cargoes--lie--



At least--'tis Mutual--Risk--

Some--found it--Mutual Gain--

Sweet Debt of Life--Each Night to owe--

Insolvent--every Noon *J580*

Though less complex than Donne's, this poem is also an ingenious working-out of a personal concept of love in terms which appear unconventional at first sight but lead one in unexpected directions. "I gave myself to him" has the connotation of complete surrender and recalls the idea that the bride is "given" in marriage. But the second line introduces the idea that this is a two-way affair, a trading proposition, and the figure of commercial exchange is carried throughout the rest of the poem. The two lovers are henceforth spoken of as the parties to a business transaction, but we always see it from the bride's point of view. In the second stanza she demurely wonders whether, in giving herself, she has given full value, so that the purchaser will not be disappointed. In the third she realizes that her "buyer" is probably willing to take the usual risks involved in any purchase; the profits ("the Subtle Cargoes") will not be realized ("Still Fable - - - lie") unless the risk is incurred. Not until the final stanza does she suggest her own risk; and then with the tremulous hope that there might be a "Mutual Gain". The poem concludes with an echo of the complete surrender of the opening line by saying



that the contract is a "Sweet Debt of Life" which will keep her continuously "insolvent": that is, owing all to her lover.

The imagery in these poems illustrates the way a metaphysical poet uses strained metaphors. These achieve more than does a mere juxtaposition of unlike images. The dramatic shock is there, it is true, but there is also a severe compression of much meaning into few words. The same compactness is effected by many modern poets, notably T. S. Eliot, whose poems make use of similar short circuits to bring a wealth of background knowledge to bear upon the subject under study. This compression is also the reason for the difficulty which a reader finds in such poetry. The reader must be ever alert to unexpected relationships between images which at first sight do not seem to have any clear connection.

A great many metaphysical poems were inspired by specific events or situations in which their authors were involved. "A great many postulate an occasion."<sup>20</sup> Donne for example, is "Riding Westward," addressing his mistress (in numerous instances), watching the sun rise, bidding farewell to his wife, standing in Twickenham Garden, and so on. Marvell is speaking to his coy Mistress or watching a little girl in a flower garden; Crashaw, and others, are conversing with friends, often other poets. They



thus place themselves in dramatic situations. This is why so much of the imagery in their poems is imagery of movement, reminiscent of the dynamic imagery in Shakespeare's plays. The dramatic figures serve to unify the various characteristics of metaphysical poetry. "The sensuous thinking, the interest in psychological aspects of experience, the dramatic tenseness, the disregard of physical beauty, the neutrality of the minor term of images, and the imaginative distance between the major and minor terms-- these characteristics are all closely connected with the predominance of dynamic imagery".<sup>21</sup> Often this does not deal with physical action but explains mental actions or psychological relationships, as in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning." In Emily Dickinson such situations are legion, as one can see even from a few first lines, such as:

I felt a funeral in my brain J280

My life had stood a loaded Gun J754

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch J414

I cannot dance upon my Toes. J326

It is when these essentially dramatic qualities are absent that the use of exaggerated metaphors becomes intolerable. One is aware of the conflict in the figures, but the poem as a whole is not conceived in dramatic terms. The result is bathetic.



The conceit becomes pointless because none of the strain which it produces is inherent in the thought of the whole piece. That is the case in some of the poems of Cowley, who was Johnson's main target in his famous criticism. An interesting comparison can be drawn between a love poem of Cowley's and those of Donne and Emily Dickinson, already quoted. "The Monopoly" is a poem of five stanzas in which the speaker loves hopelessly.

What Mines of Sulphur in my breast do ly,

That feed the eternal burnings of my heart?

Not Aetna flames more fierce or constantly,

The sounding shop of Vulcans smoaky art;

Vulcan his shop has placed there,

And Cupids Forge is set up here.

Here all those Arrows mortal Heads are made,

That fly so thick unseen through yielding air;

The Cyclops here, which labour at the trade

Are Jealousie, Fear, Sadness, and Despair.

Ah cruel God! and why to me

Gave you this curst Monopolie?

The poem continues to the end in the same vein. The reader is never made to feel that this presents a real-life situation, for the only person addressed is the absent god Vulcan, between whom and the speaker there can be no build-up of actual dramatic



conflict. The lady is mentioned only once in a later stanza when the speaker says "Deep into her bosom would I strike the dart"; in fact, he speaks more about women in general than about his own mistress. In such a poem the strained metaphors do not serve the purpose of dramatizing a situation; they are simply artificial. There is no development of theme, only elaboration, and it reaches no climax.

This concept that a poem ought to be dramatic and disquieting rather than melodious and soothing did not enjoy general acceptance during the ascendancy of either the Augustan or Victorian philosophies of literature. The viewpoints from which both Emily Dickinson and the early English metaphysicals were judged by their first disparagers were viewpoints based on an essentially conservative prejudice. The neo-classical scholar of the time of Samuel Johnson believed that the outlines of literary form had been drawn long ago by the Ancients. Subsequent artists could hope to do no more than try for the greatest possible perfection within these limits. Innovations which defied the classical authorities were presumptuous and doomed to failure. The writers and critics of the age were thus not favorably disposed toward such experiments as Donne and his followers had attempted. Hence Dr. Johnson's condemnation of the irregularities in that type of poetry.



The viewpoint of the critics who first judged Emily Dickinson's work was strangely similar to Johnson's. The late nineteenth century admired the conventional forms and metrics of Tennyson and Longfellow. Their traditional way was still held to be the ideal, the way which promised the greatest hope of poetic excellence. Emily Dickinson's original departures from this way were looked upon as aberrations.

Yet forces were already at work which were to prove that these traditionalist critics were out of touch with the changing spirit of the time. However tenaciously the die-hards clung to their time-honored ideas, the fact is that New England in the late 1800's was entering upon a period of fundamental change. Its established Puritan way of life was beginning to break up. For one thing, the new ideas of modern science were calling in question some of the basic tenets of Puritan doctrine.<sup>22</sup> For another, New England could no longer maintain her rather self-sufficient, independent way of life, in the face of an ever more cosmopolitan society growing up in America. The New Englander was forced to become less parochial in his outlook, to turn his attention more and more to wider horizons and less to his own local society. The foundations of strict Puritanism were crumbling.



This is a climate in which metaphysical poetry thrives.<sup>23</sup>

When society is undergoing a period of change or stress, poets tend to react against conventions and orthodoxies, and to turn to radical experiments. The early English metaphysical poets lived at a time when the medieval Christian idea of the world, based on the old Ptolemaic ideas of the universe, had been disproved by the new discoveries of astronomy. The foundations of their spiritual life had been shaken, and they were forced to seek new truths. Similarly, in Emily Dickinson's time advanced thinkers were beginning to question the validity of Puritan ideas of salvation, and eternity. Thinking people were forced to re-examine the very foundations of their faith. In matters of faith and dogma post-Renaissance England and late nineteenth century New England faced similar dilemmas.

The twentieth century faces even more vital problems.

Modern science and technology, while going far to meet man's physical needs, have only accentuated his spiritual and sociological problems. The poetry of this modern period of stress and change has moved farther than that of any other age in the direction of new experiments. The spirit of our time is being voiced by poets who, like T. S. Eliot, have turned their backs on all the languorous harmonies of the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Modern poetry is vigorous and experimental, with a tendency to become esoteric because of its allusiveness and its use of obscure conceits. In a



word, it has become ever more metaphysical.

Between this modern metaphysical revival and its earlier predecessors stands Emily Dickinson. At a time when traditionalist critics were still looking backward to decadent romanticism, she was writing the first great body of non-conformist verse which pointed the way to modern trends. She, like Hopkins, was a precocious forerunner of the present-day experiments with new rhythms, complex off-rhymes, and curiously figurative language. These techniques, she employed to achieve that dramatic, aphoristic style which has so endeared her to modern readers. Her achievement is all the more startling because she had to work out her theories alone, having none of the encouragement and stimulation that comes from association with a sympathetic literary milieu. Her fame came posthumously, with the advent of the modern metaphysical revival.



## Chapter II

### "GEM TACTICS:" A STUDY OF EMILY DICKINSON'S IMAGERY

The dramatic nature of Emily Dickinson's imagery reflects the tenor of her personal life, outwardly uneventful but inwardly hectic. Her poems are those of a person undergoing an emotional turmoil as painful as that revealed by Hamlet in his tortured soul-searchings. Like him she was forced to wrestle with private personal problems that were of transcendent importance in her life. Like him, too, she had to work out her problem alone, without the help or solace of a confidante who really understood the nature of her plight. In her poetry she found a safety-valve. There she gave vent to the pent-up feelings and frustrations she could not otherwise resolve.

Many of her most impassioned poems were inspired by her presumed love for a man whom she could never marry and whom she probably saw only a few times in her life.<sup>25</sup> There is a pathetic sort of play-acting in some of the postures she assumes. In some cases she pretends to be speaking to her lover in poignant little monologues; sometimes she imagines herself with him in a quiet little domestic scene; sometimes she practises how she might speak to him were she with him. But all the while she knows that her romance is impossible, for her beloved is already happily married to another. In her frustration she turned to poetry to express her



overwrought feelings. It is not surprising that poetry so inspired should be irregular and tense, rather than calm and sentimental. This phase of Emily Dickinson's life reached its crisis in the years 1861-62, at which time she wrote poetry "as if pursued by furies".<sup>26</sup> Many of the poems of this period are excited, dramatic, and unorthodox in structure. This was the time when she adopted the use of the dash instead of regular punctuation. It was the time when she wrote most of her passionate poems of love and marriage and spoke repeatedly of her own "Calvary". It is also the time when she began to dress entirely in white--her "white election", as she calls it. In a letter of this time she confides, " . . . I sing, as the Boy does by the Burying Ground--because I am afraid." From the poetry of this period one could deduce without ever having read her biography that she was emotionally overwrought. The tensions and frustrations are reflected in the bizarre imagery and form of the poems. The verses are as tortured as was the mind that composed them.

Religion was another cause of her personal dilemma. She lived at a time when the strict Calvinism of the New England Puritans was beginning to break down. In her case this religious crisis assumed a uniquely acute form, for her family and most of her friends clung to the crumbling Puritan orthodoxies which she could not accept. She was an earnest thinker on matters of religion, and her inability to make a formal declaration of faith caused her



much mental anguish. For her the kind of religiosity which prides itself on church attendance and public testimony was impossible, yet she never lost her faith in God. Her relationship with God became a personal one, and from this sort of individual communion with the Deity come many of the surprising figures of her divine poetry. God became a familiar reality, "Our Old Neighbor-God". She could seek communion with him without the formalities of public worship:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church--

I keep it staying at Home--

With a bobolink for a Chorister--

And an Orchard for a Dome. J324

What has been called her "archness with God,"<sup>27</sup> though not to the taste of every reader, is simply her way of dramatizing this intimate, amicable relationship. In instances where she seems to be impish or pert, she is really celebrating her unique sort of Holy Communion, for her relationship with God was intimate and personal. She knew Him because she found Him in all the little miracles of life in her home and garden, not in the pretentious formalities of church worship. God could be approached in the way that one would approach one's most trusted friend. He became to her the confidante she could not find among her mortal friends. This paradoxical situation is illustrated in the following famous poem:



I never lost as much but twice,

And that was in the sod.

Twice have I stood a beggar

Before the door of God!

Angels--twice descending

Reimbursed my store--

Burglar! Banker!--Father!

I am poor once more! J49

To call God a "Burglar" because He takes away those who are precious to us, and a "Banker" because He fulfills our need when we are spiritually bereft, may be a novel way of saying that "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away". It achieves its purpose, however, of focussing our attention on the extent to which we are the victims of His whims. Elsewhere she says that God would be "disappointing" if he urged, "Disciple, call again" when there was no hope of our prayer's being answered. Yet, like many who preceded her, she sees what a loss the breakdown of complete religious faith has been:

Those--dying then,

Knew where they went--

They went to God's Right Hand--

That hand is amputated now

And God cannot be found-- J1551

It is not through disrespect or sacrilege that she applies such



irreverent terms to the Deity; it is through a desire to place the vital question before us starkly, arrestingly.

Emily Dickinson's renunciation of worldly contacts forced her to find a faith and a philosophical basis of life that would enable her to find spiritual food in her restricted sphere of activity. Her psychological dilemma was therefore painfully magnified. Externally she adjusted herself to it by finding a universe in her home and her garden; internally she made a playmate of God. She was never able completely to resolve her frustrations, for God, like other friends, was sometimes unreachable or cold, or indifferent, or imperious. It is these various stresses and strains of her religious life that she dramatizes so startlingly in her poems.

At least one of her poems was severely criticized by some theologians for treating a sacrosanct theme in an unorthodox way:

God is a distant--stately Lover--

Who as he states us--by His Son--

Verily, a Vicarious Courtship--

"Miles", and "Priscilla", were such an One--

But, lest the Soul--like fair "Priscilla"

Choose the Envoy--and spurn the Groom--

Vouches, with hyperbolic archness--

"Miles", and "John Alden" were Synonyme-- J357



This was called by one shocked churchman, " . . . one of the most offensive bits of contemptuous Unitarianism that I have met with". Had Emily Dickinson known that her little verses would arouse such angry fulminations, she would probably have been highly amused. Her God was not a petty, sanctimonious martinet, but one who took the wise long view of human beings and their failings. He was not a peevish dictator, likely to take offense at man's narrow or ignorant prejudices; he was a "Paragon of Chivalry". For her to compare God and His Son to Miles Standish and John Alden was no disrespectful effort to challenge an important point in Christian dogma; it was just a way of expressing her mystification at the metaphysics of the Trinity. The allusion to Miles Standish is only another instance of her way of expressing the paradox in the most dramatic form possible.

This expression of perceptions and concepts by means of images is not restricted to her religious poems, however. Her thoughts on all subjects which interested her are summed up in poetic figures; she wrote no prose treatises to explain her philosophy. Like Donne, she sought to make poetry out of reasoning. Yet, as Austin Warren has said, "Versified analysis is not poetry; to escape being metered prose, poetry must either relieve its statements by images or think in images."<sup>28</sup> It is the latter that Emily Dickinson repeatedly does. The images by means of which she communicates her ideas are often so arresting that she herself



achieves what she describes a minister doing in the following:

He fumbles at your Soul  
As Players at the Keys  
Before they drop full Music on--  
He stuns you by degrees--  
Prepares your brittle Nature  
For the Etherial Blow  
By fainter Hammers--further heard--  
Then nearer--Then so slow  
Your Breath has time to straighten--  
Your Brain--to bubble cool--  
Deals--One--imperial--Thunderbolt--  
That scalps your naked Soul--  
  
When Winds take Forests in their Paws--  
The Universe--is still-- J315

Here the rapid succession of violent metaphors has the effect of creating the dramatic clash necessary to wrench us out of a merely casual reading to a more acute comprehension of how the orator works to make us understand. In many of her own striking figures of speech Emily Dickinson, also, delivers a thunderbolt "That scalps your naked Soul." What makes many of her works so memorable is her way of epitomizing an essential point in a poem by means of an arresting figure. This is one of the striking similarities between her and the metaphysical poets who preceded and followed her



in the tradition.

The powerful urge to express herself in poetry was more dramatic for Emily Dickinson than for most other writers because, though she looked upon it as an outlet for her pent-up feelings, it brought her into conflict with her austere father, whom she did not wish to offend. She thus had to compose her poems somewhat surreptitiously. In a letter to her brother she confides, "We do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it's pretty much all real life." Also in a poem written in 1862 she says:

They shut me up in Prose  
As when a little Girl  
They put me in the Closet -  
Because they liked me "still"-  
  
Still! Could themselves have peeped  
And seen my Brain - go round -  
They might as wise have lodged a Bird  
For Treason - in the Pound -  
  
Himself has but to will  
And easy as a Star  
Look down upon Captivity  
And laugh - No more have I - J613

Stone walls do not a prison make - nor do the dictates of an



uncomprehending parent. Yet from this essential conflict in Emily Dickinson's immediate environment ensues some part of that stress and strain which she made articulate in her grotesque imagery. She was forced to play her game alone, and many of her strained metaphors derive from a private association which two things had in her mind but which, to anyone else, would be occult in the extreme.

John Crowe Ransom in his book The World's Body has a chapter entitled "The Tense of Poetry" that explains what metaphysical poets like Dickinson were trying to do.<sup>29</sup> The literary history of a race, he says, shows three periods: (1) an ancient, innocent one in which poetry and prose were one; (2) a stage when prose has grown in efficiency and purity and poetry "has arisen by an effort to stand by it". and (3) the modern period when poetry has had to become difficult and strange in order to be poetry. In the original Garden of Eden all was poetry until Adam ate of the tree of knowledge; then was born prose. Prose, the record of man's development, is a long, continuous story, against which poetry has found it difficult to strive. In our technical civilization poetry cannot always express the meaning or technicality: efficiency has outstripped sensibility. Man in his original, untechnical "Garden of Eden" state of innocence did not have the kind of idyllic, poetic life some suppose. Being



incapable of conceiving concepts, he was, as Ransom explains, also incapable of true percepts; he was thus without true sensibility. Creative poets look back to and try to re-create this perfect state of sensibility which we can only imagine. Poetry does not operate upon the level of practical reality, but upon that of a perfect "might-have-been". Its tense is past; it is the apodosis of a contrary-to-fact situation. The pleasure of poetry is seen in those poems in which we are taken back into some joyous past and, in imagination, forget the present, to revel in past joys. But how far back should poets go in their nostalgia? Cannot poetry express the present instead? This is what the metaphysical poets did. The most exhilarating poetry would be that which combines the simple sensibility of the nostalgic poetry with the actual prose realities and terms of our era.

That is what Emily Dickinson does in her most successful pieces. The mood is created by invoking images from the here and now, familiar images which yet have the power to recreate for us the purely sensuous perceptions of a particular moment. A good example of this ability to appeal directly to the senses is this stanza, which brings us up short with a surprising yet uncannily apt figure:

There's a certain Slant of light,  
Winter Afternoons--



That oppresses like the Heft

Of Cathedral Tunes--

Winter sunlight and the music in a cathedral may not have any logical connection, but the awe-inspiring, almost other-worldly quality of the one does seem to suggest the other. The mood is created by the comparison. Then the poem goes on to describe further that eerie feeling produced by the wan, oblique winter light, which gives us "Heavenly Hurt" and is an:

. . . imperial affliction

Sent us of the Air.

When it comes, the Landscape listens -

Shadows - hold their breath -

When it goes, 'tis like the Distance

On the look of Death. *J258*

Here is felt the true "metaphysical shudder." What is a sort of mystical experience at the level of the senses is made palpable. The last two lines are a masterful conclusion, for they finalize the oppressive nature of the whole feeling that is being described, and leave one with an image that is curiously suggestive. There is no attempt at technical prose explanation here; it is the magic of poetry.

Emily Dickinson's felicitous way of objectifying the incomprehensible is seen at its best in her many poems on death and immortality. Like all great writers, she realizes that the peaks



of dramatic intensity are most effectively described in terms of the simplest situations or events. Any discussion of the imponderables is likely to seem unreal until brought down to the realm of familiar experience. This truth explains why certain verses which succeed in capturing this effect have such a ringing, unforgettable quality. Wordsworth in "Michael" expresses the ache in every sad father's heart with the lines:

" --- And 'tis believed by all  
That many and many a day he thither went  
and never lifted up a single stone."

Keats makes universal an experience of the feebleness of old age, by the use of concrete detail:

"Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs."

Shakespeare does it over and over in such famous bits as:

"Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more."

Many of Emily Dickinson's finest poems derive their poignancy from this same effect. She has an uncanny way of combining images of death or immortality with the commonest, lowliest details of everyday life. The juxtaposition is so startling, yet so evocative, that it hits one with tremendous dramatic force, while yet achieving an effect of restraint. The following is a good example:



I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--  
The Stillness in the Room  
Was like the Stillness in the Air--  
Between the Heaves of Storm--  
  
The Eyes around--had wrung them dry--  
And Breaths were gathering firm  
For that last Onset--when the King  
Be witnessed--in the Room--  
  
I willed my Keepsakes--Signed away  
What portion of me be  
Assignable--and then it was  
There interposed a Fly--  
  
With Blue--uncertain stumbling Buzz--  
Between the light--and me--  
And then the Windows failed--and then  
I could not see to see-- J465

This brings us as close as one can get to appreciating the feeling of one who realizes he is dying. The buzzing of the fly is a realistic detail whose obtrusion upon the awful incident gives the whole a stark reality.

A similar situation seen from the point of view of the observers rather than from that of the victim is this poem:



The last Night that She lived

It was a Common Night

Except the Dying--this to Us

Made Nature different

We noticed smallest things--

Things overlooked before

By this great light upon our Minds

Italicized--as 'twere.

As We went out and in

Between Her final Room

And Rooms where Those to be alive

Tomorrow were, a Blame

That Others could exist

While She must finish quite

A Jealousy for Her arose

So nearly infinite--

We waited while She passed--

It was a narrow time--

Too jostled were Our Souls to speak

At length the notice came.

She mentioned, and forgot--

Then lightly as a Reed



Bent to the Water, struggled scarce--

Consented, and was dead--

And We--We placed the Hair--

And drew the Head erect--

And then an awful leisure was

Belief to regulate-- *J1100*

Again there is the same duality, the thoughts about a mortal's incomprehensible passing into immortality, together with the inescapable trivia of human life. Our most exalted moments are inextricably bound up with the very real reminders that our feet are upon the clay. Like the hero who, at the moment of his triumph, recalls some insignificant incident in his past, the people who are watching the relentless approach of Death are reminded of the smallest things of the business of living. In such an awesome moment the reference to simple, everyday things provides a contrast that gives us an impression of the realities of the occasion.

In another poem on the theme of dying Emily Dickinson approaches the limits of what is humanly knowable.

Our journey had advanced--

Our feet were almost come

To that odd Fork in Being's Road--

Eternity--by Term--



Our pace took sudden awe--  
Our feet--reluctant--led--  
Before--were Cities--but Between--  
The Forest of the Dead--  
  
Retreat--was out of Hope--  
Behind--a Sealed Route--  
Eternity's White Flag--Before--  
And God--at every Gate-- J615

In this poem, says Yvor Winters, the human soul is taken "to the brink of the incomprehensible and is left there, for retreat is impossible, and advance is impossible without a transmutation of the soul's very nature."<sup>30</sup> That is the mystery which Emily Dickinson, like all other sensitive spirits, often grapples with. She returns to it again and again in her poems on death and immortality, and applies to its solution all her devices of metaphysical poetry. This insurmountable barrier between the living and the dead she defines by contrasting the reality of life with the unknowability of death.

One more famous poem on this same theme<sup>also</sup> compares death to a journey--a very familiar comparison--but used in an original way.

Because I could not stop for Death--  
He kindly stopped for me--  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves--  
And Immortality.



We slowly drove--He knew no haste  
And I had put away  
My labor and my leisure too,  
For His Civility--

We passed the School, where Children strove  
At Recess--in the Ring--  
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain--  
We passed the Setting Sun--

Or rather--He passed Us--  
The Dews drew quivering and chill--  
For only Gossamer, my Gown--  
My Tippet--only Tulle--

We paused before a House that seemed  
A swelling of the Ground--  
The Roof was scarcely visible--  
The Cornice--in the Ground--

Since then--'tis Centuries--and yet  
Feels shorter than the Day  
I first surmised the Horses Heads  
Were toward Eternity-- J712

The journey starts in a disarming way, just as if it were an  
ordinary journey; the two in the carriage pass by the familiar road-



side scenes, such as the school and the fields. But, without warning, as if there were no difference between it and other scenes, they pass the sun. Before the reader has an opportunity to backtrack mentally to reality, he is looking at the world from the other side of the veil. The lumping together of the real with the unreal so casually as to give us no chance to refuse to go along, emphasizes again the idea that death may overtake us at anytime, without warning, and may come clad, not in exotic trappings that would inspire us with fear, but in the unexciting familiar garb of daily life.

Death and immortality were two of Emily Dickinson's favorite subjects, and the imagery by which she sought to convey her ideas about them is a study in itself. Besides the breathtaking combination of realistic details with esoteric ideas, she often describes death in the most surprising and unexpected metaphors.

In writing of the dying, she observes:

. . . like a Skater's Brook

The busy eyes congealed *J519*

The opinion of the dead person, were he present, is "Death's Etherial Scorn"; the buried one is:

. . . adjusted like a seed

In careful fitted Ground *J804*

and death itself is

That Short--potential stir

That each can make but once-- *J1307*



the yearning to know what lies beyond death is so intriguing that "I would go, to know" but "the Saucy, Saucy Seraph" is unyielding. Despite all her various ways of trying to comprehend the mystery while she is still on this side the grave, it remains

. . . the White Exploit

Once to achieve--annuls the power

Once to communicate. J922

Emily Dickinson's poems reveal that she was a person who felt the experiences of human life very keenly. Even her renunciation of all normal contacts with the world outside her own home did not spare her from the feeling that life was a vital, intense adventure. More than any other poet, she could "see the world in a grain of sand," and her own thoughts and the natural environment of her garden provided her with infinitely more raw material for creating a full life than she could possibly hope to assimilate in one short lifetime:

No Romance sold unto

Could so enthrall a Man

As the perusal of

His Individual One -

'Tis Fiction's - to dilute to Plausibility

Our Novel - When 'tis small enough

To credit - 'Tisn't true! J669



By withdrawing from society she broadened, rather than restricted her scope:

Perhaps I asked too large -

I take - no less than skies -

For Earths, grow thick as

Berries, in my native town

My Basket holds - just - Firmaments -

Those - dangle easy - on my arm,

But smaller bundles - cram. *J352*

In this retreat she turned her penetrating, analytical eyes upon creatures of her garden and produced a large number of nature poems that are unique in their perception and suggestive power. As she says herself, she got to know Nature's creatures and to "feel for them a transport / Of Cordiality". That admission is significant. Her observation was that of the artist rather than the scientific naturalist, subjective rather than objective. Her depiction of nature is always colored by her own individual sensibilities; she is emotionally involved in each picture.

Since Emily Dickinson did not look at the natural life in her garden with the cool eye of a scientist but rather with the impassioned eye of one who saw in it not only the object itself but a microcosm, and a divine message, her terms for describing it are unscientific, personal and dramatic. The things she chooses to



mention about a bird or animal or flower are not so often details of physical appearance as they are revelations of character. She is able to discern a general quality and express it in terms which make one imagine the creature as a distinct personality. Rarely is there any listing of anatomical details such as the size of a bird's beak, or the length of a dog's tail. Instead there is an evocation of the creature in its entirety, complete with its attributes and its effect upon the beholder. For this kind of writing her violent metaphors provide the richness of connotation that she wanted.

Emily Dickinson felt every experience of life with breathless intensity. Nothing that went on around her was to be passed over casually or carelessly. Her every action--meeting a friend, seeing a summer storm, reading a letter--was done at the cost of great nervous and emotional energy. Things which most of us do habitually and without any searching thoughts, she contemplated with a probing mind. To express this searching, analytic perceptiveness, she used the most arresting metaphors because she wanted to set down her own keen feelings. To her these minutiae were worlds in small, from which she could learn something of the great truths and profound mysteries with which all sensitive souls wrestle. They could, therefore, not be described in terms which did not convey the surprise, the awe, the wonder which they communicated to her. If she describes what is ordinarily an unsensational



sort of thing by the use of striking images, it is this personal philosophical quality that she is trying to convey. To make one realize what she, with her more profound vision, saw in a thing, she compares it to something which at first seems to have no similarity but which, if we pursue the thought as she describes it, will reveal a comparable element. The trope is thus not a pointlessly fantastic one, for it leads us to delve beneath the obvious or surface qualities to see something more intrinsic. The mushroom is the "Elf of Plants" whose whole career is "shorter than a Snake's Delay." Every one of us has seen a mushroom, but when we read a description of it in such impish terms, we are piqued into thinking again of the brevity of its life. If we are thus led to concentrate on some element of a thing which we have accepted too carelessly, Emily Dickinson's dramatic figure has fulfilled its purpose. The following description of a jay illustrates this device of making familiar things more noteworthy by means of unexpected comparisons:

No Brigadier throughout the year

So Civic as the Jay--

A neighbor and a Warrior too

With shrill felicity

Pursuing winds that censure us

A February Day,

The Brother of the Universe

Was never blown away--



The Snow and he are intimate--  
I've often seen them play  
When Heaven looked upon us all  
With much severity  
I felt apology were due  
To an insulted sky  
Whose pompous frown was Nutriment  
To their Temerity -  
The Pillow of his daring Head  
Is pungent Evergreens -  
His Larder - terse and Militant  
Unknown - refreshing things -  
His character - a Tonic  
His Future - a Dispute -  
Unfair an Immortality  
That leaves this Neighbor out - J1561

The most famous and most successful example of this use of  
conflicting figures to give a new mental picture of a familiar  
object is the poem about the hummingbird:

A Route of Evanescence  
With a revolving Wheel -  
A Resonance of Emerald -  
A Rush of Cochineal -  
And every Blossom on the Bush



Adjusts its tumbled Head -

The mail from Tunis, probably,

An easy Morning's ride - J1463

Here, in a few strokes, are given the distinguishing qualities of this shy, restless visitor to the flower garden. If one is fortunate enough to see a hummingbird among the flowers, he must strain to keep his eyes on it, for its darting movements are very hard to follow: its route is "A Route of Evanescence." If one is able to focus his eyes upon it, he will see its beautiful colors, but they will be blurred by its whirring wings and one will get only a "revolving wheel", a "resonance of Emerald", and a "rush of Cochineal". It is a strange and meagre description, yet anyone who has seen this bird on the wing has a vivid mental picture recalled to his mind. The unusual comparisons are enough to invoke the image. The poem - one could almost call it a riddle - is as enigmatic and as brief as the bird's visit, but just as completely realized. It has been said that good descriptive poetry makes us look at a familiar thing as if it were for the first -- or the last -- time. As Emily herself put it:

The Doomed -- regard the Sunrise

With different Delight

and

The Man - to die - tomorrow



Harks for the Meadow Bird

Because its' Music stirs the Axe

That clamors for his head - J294

Like Aesop, Emily Dickinson saw birds and animals as possessing human traits and motives, so that many of her descriptions seize upon some quality that is applicable to ideas quite removed from the physical world of nature. Not only does she evoke the soft murmur of the bee in flight by comparing it to "trains of Cars on Tracks of Plush," but she always speaks of his "assault" on the flower, of his "victory" over it, or of the wider implications one could see in an idealized view of this elemental tryst:

Their Moment consummated -

Remained for him - to flee -

Remained for her - of rapture

But the humility. J1339

The snake, in one of her best known poems, makes one feel "zero at the bone"; in another it is "summer's treason." The oriole is

A Pleader -- a Dissembler --

An Epicure -- a Thief --

Betimes an Oratorio --

An Ecstasy in chief -- J1466



The familiar virtues of the robin are summed up thus:

The Robin is a Gabriel  
In humble circumstances --  
His Dress denotes him socially,  
Of Transport's Working Classes --  
He has the punctuality  
Of the New England Farmer  
The same oblique integrity,  
A Vista vastly warmer --

In like manner she characterizes bobolinks, rats, caterpillars, spiders, trees, flowers, thunderstorms, sunsets, frosts - in fact, all the manifestations of nature that she observed in her little world. Not one characterization is mere exposition; every one evokes a subjective reaction.

Emily Dickinson was never satisfied with half-awareness or looking only at the surface of a thing. She always tried to see into the very heart of things - to find what is essential:

Perception of an object costs  
Precise the Object's loss --  
Perception in itself a Gain  
Replying to its Price --  
The Object Absolute -- is nought --  
Perception sets it fair  
And then upbraids a Perfectness  
That situates so far -- J1071



There was a truth to be learned from every object that one saw, and what she wanted to do was to see through to it, and to express it in terms that would make others see it. To her there were, truly, "books in the running brooks" and "sermons in stones." To get at such essences was often a painful understanding, but one to which a keenly alive soul must endlessly strive; anything less is a fool's paradise. And she pays her reader the compliment of believing that he, too, would rather be alive enough to see ultimate realities than obtuse enough not to want to, however painful they may be. In order to express that sort of super-perception, Emily Dickinson turned to violent metaphors, in order to shock the reader into the acute mental activity that metaphysical poetry demands. Reading such poems is in itself a creative act, for we are first stung to greater awareness and then led to deeper thinking.



### Chapter III

#### "JINGLING BELLS:" EMILY DICKINSON'S USE OF RHYME

Emily Dickinson's treatment of rhyme is as original as her imagery. She consistently used imperfect and suspended rhymes long before their use had won the general acceptance it now has. In her poems imperfect rhyme is exploited as a device to heighten the tension, especially when used in conjunction with perfect rhyme in such a way as to make it appear to a careless reader as a mere aberration. This technique was at first widely misunderstood. Her earliest critics were no less dismayed by these unorthodox rhymes than by her clashing images. Many ridiculed her for her "appalling rhymes" and her "waywardness",<sup>31</sup> though from the first there were also devotees who "defended the quaint charm of her use of assonance and half-rhyming vowels."<sup>32</sup> Today she is lavishly praised for those very rhymes to which so many objected when her poems first appeared in print. Behind this reversal of feeling lies a revolution in thought with regard to rhyme, a revolution which Emily Dickinson did much to bring about. To understand her contribution to it, one needs to review traditional and modern ideas of rhyme.

Perfect or full rhyme follows very rigid rules which have been traditional in English poetry for centuries. Words are considered to rhyme only when the final vowel and all parts which come



after it are identical in sound but the preceding consonant is different, as in fear--hear or rolled--hold. This is masculine rhyme. In feminine rhyme two or more syllables are involved, the final ones being always identical and unaccented, but the stressed syllable similar to ordinary masculine rhyme (waving--craving, cheerless--fearless). If three syllables are included, the rhyme is triple (actually--factually, tactical--practical). When the rhyming words end with vowel sounds, we have what is called vowel rhyme or assonantal rhyme (free--degree, grow--hoe). Few imperfections are found in conventional rhyme, and those which do exist are not used in any extensive way as a scheme of rhyme in their own right, but only as occasional variants. The most common is that referred to as eye rhyme, as in some--home or move--love, where the similarity in spelling appears to give rhyming sounds although the vowel sounds are pronounced differently. These rules had been adhered to by poets fairly rigidly until the time of Emily Dickinson.

Modern thinking with respect to rhyme has changed greatly; in fact, the perfection of new rhyme patterns may be considered one of the most significant advancements of the modern period as far as poetic techniques are concerned. Besides the traditional meaning of rhyme, to which many poets still adhere, there are a number of distinct new types. Basically, modern usage admits as rhymes words in which only one sound, not necessarily at the end of a word, is identical. In the modern sense vowel rhyme would be considered to



exist in such words as rag--hat, line--wife. Likewise, two words are considered to have consonantal rhyme if the same consonant sound occurs anywhere in them, as in rag--eager, ill--pale, rough--safest. Mixed rhyme is said to exist when features of both vowel and consonant rhymes occur in pairs of rhyming words, as in profile--docile, cucumber--wonder. Because of this greater scope, the modern poet is often able to achieve striking musical effects by clever combinations of these various devices. It is like providing an orchestra with a number of new instruments which, in combination with those already in use, can be employed to obtain new harmonies not possible with any combination of existing instruments. Particularly with respect to the vowel sounds, which are the natural variables in speech patterns, the poet can make the verse music a much more flexible element of the entire poetic communication.

Henry Lanz, in his book The Physical Basis of Rime, says that every vowel sound is made up of a chord, in which notes other than the basic one can be identified.<sup>33</sup> In music the sound following a certain chord is logically one based on the overtones in it, after which the human ear seems to want to return to the original and to conclude on the tonic note. Other sequences are less pleasing. This musical fact is also applicable to rhymes in poetry. A discord is produced when the vowel sound in the second of a pair of rhyming words, though fundamentally the same, has different overtones, usually produced by a different consonantal environment, as in war--



star. Combining such effects with the greater flexibility allowed by the modern use of rhyme, the poet has at his command a technical device that enables him to achieve greater aural suggestiveness than is possible under the restrictions of conventional rhyme. This device is also the basis of the feeling of dissatisfaction which associates itself with imperfect rhyme.

Alliteration and assonance or internal rhyme depend for their effects upon this same principle. Pure assonance demands that the same vowel sound be repeated without the same accompanying consonant. But the ear finds it more satisfying if the assonantal series ends with the same arrangement of vowel and consonant as was used at the beginning. The following lines are pleasing to the ear and easy to remember because the principle is adhered to in each:

Hear the mellow wedding bells

(Poe: The Bells)

I like to see it lap the miles

(Dickinson: The Railroad Train).

This trick adds memorableness to many set idiomatic expressions, such as cash and carry, time and tide, part and parcel, and even coca-cola. It is frequently used by Shakespeare in such lines as

The will! the will!

We will hear Caesar's will!



and

Then can I grieve at grievances foregone.

The advance made by modern poetry consists primarily of a more studied use of these ideas for both internal and terminal rhymes.

The various possibilities in the use of rhyme are resolved by T. H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson's latest biographer, into five basic types; true or traditional, identical, vowel, imperfect, and suspended. Identical rhyme is the use of words in which not only the last vowel with following consonants, but also the preceding consonant is the same, as in light--delight. Vowel rhyme is seen in such words as day - free, where the final vowels, though not similar throughout, conclude with the same sound. Imperfect rhyme means that identical vowel sounds are followed by different consonants, as in sat - path. In suspended rhyme different vowel sounds are followed by identical consonants, as in drift - left.

A classification of Emily Dickinson's poems into these five categories reveals the extent to which she departed from the accepted rhymes that had been a tradition in English poetry for centuries. Of her 1,775 poems, only some two hundred use perfect rhyme exclusively. In all others, though they may make some use of perfect rhyme also, there is at least one example of some sort of unconventional end rhyme. No fewer than twelve hundred have one or more instances of suspended rhyme. Imperfect rhyme (that is, the use of



similar vowels followed by different consonants) is found in one hundred eighteen. The effects achieved by the use of these rhyme arrangements provide one of the delights of Emily Dickinson's verse music.

Inexact rhymes are often used to heighten the dramatic clash of the metaphysical figures in a poem. Just as we are made to feel the strain produced by the violent metaphors, so we are jarred by the inexactness of the rhyme. The following is a good example:

The Soul selects her own Society -

Then - shuts the Door -

To her divine majority -

Present no more -

Unmoved - she notes the Chariots - pausing -

At her low Gate -

Unmoved - an Emperor be kneeling

Upon her Mat -

I've known her - from an ample nation -

Choose One -

Then - close the Valves of her attention -

Like Stone - J303

The variations here are progressive. In lines 2 and 4, where one normally expects identity of sound, the rhymes are perfect; the vowel rhymes in the first and third lines are close enough not to produce



any effect of strain. In the second stanza, however, the main rhymes (Gate - Mat) are suspended. In the third, where the thought comes to its climax, there is a dramatic clash in the effect of the rhyming words, One - Stone, the vowel being sustained to create an effect of grim finality. The effect is heightened, also, by the fact that in this stanza there are but two syllables in each rhyming line, so that the only accent falls on the suspended rhyme, thereby emphasizing its irregularity. As Lanz points out, the consonantal environment of the vowel o is so different that one feels a sense of dissatisfaction, aggravated by the seeming effect of visual rhyme in the words. The jangling inexactness is here clearly used to produce the same effect of dramatic clash as is achieved by the violent metaphors, so characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

Aesthetically, the ear is better satisfied if the final rhyme is a perfect one, as Lanz has explained. There is a frustration associated with imperfect rhymes, and this Emily Dickinson often employs at the conclusion of a poem to create the strain and violence which is inherent in an idea. The last rhyme, instead of creating an impression of completeness, as a closed couplet, for example, would do, leaves one with a feeling of tension, or, to quote Thornton Wilder, "as of a ceiling being removed from above our heads."<sup>34</sup> The following is a good example:



The World - feels Dusty

When We stop to Die -

We want the Dew - then -

Honors - taste dry -

Flags - vex a Dying face -

But the least Fan

Stirred by a friend's Hand -

Cools - like the Rain -

Mine be the Ministry

When thy Thirst comes -

Dews of Thessaly, to fetch -

And Hybla Balms - *J715*

The rhyme in the first stanza is conventional vowel rhyme, but in the second and third it is suspended. In the concluding stanza the inexactness is made more remarkable by the fact that the vowel in comes is short, whereas that in Balms is sustained. Here, as in "The soul selects her own Society", the vowel in the final word is capable of such extension that it contrasts sharply with that in the first word of the pair.

The reader's reaction to these words illustrates a truth which is often overlooked in discussions of verse music: the fact that the aesthetic satisfaction one receives from a particularly



melodious bit of verse is inseparable from its meaning. There is no such thing as "pure music" in poetry. As John Crowe Ransom has ingeniously shown, Tennyson's beautiful line, "the murmuring of innumerable bees," so often quoted as an example of euphony, could be parodied as "the murdering of innumerable beeves".<sup>35</sup> A reader's emotion, though, would be changed from a sort of languorous pleasure to something like dread. The meaning of the words is the essential thing. Tonal devices can never be more than buttresses. In the two poems by Emily Dickinson just quoted, the powerful effect of the unusual rhymes results partly from the sounds, but also to a large measure from the fact that those sounds occur at climactic points in the thought. It is another instance of the way in which she makes all the different strata of verbal communication - the meaning, the sound, and the imagery - work together to one end. Thus used, rhyme is not merely the repetition of like sounds.

Emily Dickinson's penchant for irregular rhymes and sound-effects shows itself in the infinite variety of arrangements which she used. Sometimes she adopted a four-line stanza having three rhyming lines with some rhymes perfect, some imperfect and some suspended, but in some cases does not follow that form throughout, preferring to let the mood determine the form, as in "I know where wells grow - Droughtless Wells." Sometimes all the lines of a stanza will rhyme but will show a mixture of exact and inexact rhymes.



Or the rhyme in a four-line stanza may be perfect for the second and fourth lines but suspended for the first and third. Often, too, the poem may conclude with an isolated line or couplet bearing no formal similarity to preceding stanzas. There are many poems in which no set stanza form exists but where haunting rhymes recur at irregular intervals. Not all of these experiments are equally successful, but they illustrate the spirit which produced the splendid ones that captivate the reader.

Emily Dickinson's consistent efforts to make the sound reinforce the sense also led her to try an amazing variety of rhymes which defy formal classification. One poem begins:

She lay as if at play  
Her life had leaped away -  
Intending to return -  
But not so soon - J369

The stanza is a study in assonance and alliteration within lines as well as in terminal rhymes. The first two lines are joined by the -ay rhyme, but also by alliteration and assonance; so are the last two lines. The end-rhymes in the next stanza are dropt - sport - forgot - start, a strangely interlocking series of sounds. The second and fourth (sport - start) are suspended rhymes, but also echo the other lines through the final consonant and the reversal of the -ro of "dropt" in "sport" and "forgot". The last of the four



is the only one to introduce a different vowel. Thus there is a sort of contrapuntal music playing throughout the stanza. Similar polyphonic experiments can be seen in such rhymed groups as: green - mean - field - stone, through - rouge, thread-emerald, smile - well - small - sell, and countless others. Some of these, it is true, are no more than poetic vagaries, but they spring from the same concern for aural appeal that makes for memorableness, when felicitously used to describe something keenly felt.

It has already been pointed out that there is normally a feeling of satisfaction if the end of a rhyming or assonantal series returns to the same arrangement of vowels and consonants that was used in the beginning, that is, to conclude with a perfect rhyme. Such a rhyme would tend to produce the harmonious pleasantness one meets in a great many dreamy idyllic pieces of Victorian and early twentieth-century poetry. Emily Dickinson, too, wrote many poems in this genre, and some of them are among her most widely known, though not usually her greatest works. Though charming and often deftly phrased, they are sentimental, and lacking in fire. Such are the well-known "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church," "Success," "The Railroad Train," "A Cemetery," and many more. In these the rhymes are mainly regular and the verse music and metre rather conventional because the poet is attempting only a quiet description. They are the delightful little cameos of her art. In them one does not get the "missives from Eternity" or the urgent



cries from the heart which one does in poems like "The soul selects her own Society."

Occasionally Emily Dickinson reversed the arrangement: she used imperfect rhymes in all but the last pair. The famous poem about the snake, beginning "A Narrow Fellow in the Grass," consists of twenty-four lines, with alternate lines rhyming. None of the rhymes is traditional except that in the final stanza:

But never met this Fellow  
Attended or alone  
Without a tighter breathing  
And Zero at the bone - J986

By the time one reaches this stanza, he is conditioned to expect imperfect rhymes, and the coldly regular "alone - bone" brings the poem to a dramatic conclusion. Evidently it is the element of contrast, of surprise, that the writer wanted to exploit. She never gives us for long the soporific effect of anticipated rhymes in anticipated patterns.

Not only Dickinson's varied experiments with rhyme but also her consistent employment of it show how important a feature of poetry she considered it to be. She wrote only one poem in what can properly be called free verse.<sup>36</sup> The critic Thomas Wentworth Higginson, with whom she carried on a now-famous correspondence, was bothered by her unusual use of rhyme and advised her to abandon it



altogether, as Walt Whitman had done. To her such a suggestion was unthinkable, and she never appears to have considered it as a possibility. She replied that she "could not drop the bells whose jingling cooled my tramp." In her compressed, aphoristic style the rhymes were another way of communicating her moods, and it would be preposterous to abandon them.

Like all poets who are enamored of rhyme, she sometimes jokingly carried it to extremes, as in this note asking a friend for a letter:

Spurn the termerity -  
Rashness of Calvary -  
Gay were Gethsemane  
Knew we of Thee - J1432

The following is a similar virtuoso piece, in which the poet seems obsessed with the desire for the music of many-syllabled rhyme:

My Heart ran so to thee  
It would not wait for me  
And I affronted grew  
And drew away  
For whatsoe'er my pace  
He first achieve thy Face  
How general a Grace  
Allotted two -



Not in malignity  
Mentioned I this to thee -  
Had he obliquity  
Soonest to share  
But for the Greed of him -  
Boasting my Premium -  
Basking in Bethleem  
Ere I be there - *J1237*

In such instances the rhyme and the alliterative jingling so obtrudes upon the sense that meaning is almost lost sight of. It has often been noted that many-syllabled rhymes in English give a ludicrous effect, and these fancies of Emily Dickinson's are no exception. They are, at best, poetic exercises.

A study of all Emily Dickinson's poetic experiments suggests that they are outgrowths or expressions of states of mind. More than those of most poets, they are bound up with biographical facts. In her love poems she sang of a love that was hopeless of earthly fulfillment; in her religious poems she celebrated a faith, the rites of which she could not wholeheartedly accept; in her nature poems she reveals a passion which is a result of her withdrawal from wider involvements with others who might have shared her fondness and her keen insight. In all her poetic expressions one must conceive a solitary being who is working out her own salvation in retirement. To this fact can be attributed the sense of



strain, the tension, that is implicit in metaphysical lyrics.

For Emily Dickinson ecstasy always remained an imagined thing, and her love poems, unlike those of John Donne, are cries of frustration rather than paeans of rapturous consummation. Her lover is frequently addressed, but as a "Bright Absentee." Her love poems become dramatic monologues. The absence of her lover is a central fact even in the most impassioned of her "bridal" poems.

Title divine - is mine!

The Wife - without the Sign!

Acute Degree - conferred on me -

Empress of Calvary!

Royal - all but the Crown!

Betrothed - without the swoon

God sends us Women -

When you - hold - Garnet to Garnet -

Gold - to Gold -

Born - Bridalled - Shrouded -

In a Day

"My Husband" - women say -

Stroking the Melody -

Is This - the way? *J1072*

It is the same in all her love poems. "Wild nights, wild nights/  
Were I with thee," she cried out, but she is, nevertheless, alone.  
"I live with him, I see his face," she says, but it is only in



imagination. The very hopelessness makes it the more poignant, and, as she herself said, "A Wounded Deer--leaps highest," and it is "The Smitten Rock that gushes!" Thus, her most fervent effusions are born of keen frustration. Such dramatic feelings she could not express in the melodious niceties which might be appropriate to pretty parlor pieces. She not only wrenched the stress, and strained the metaphor, she also twisted the rhymes, for they, too, must express her inner tension.

Professor Whicher, in his biography This Was A Poet, quotes an English critic who has suggested "that Emily intended the conscious disjunction of her rhymes to express her perception of a world where seams would not fit and sequences unravelled out of reach."<sup>37</sup> He then considers this interesting theory but rejects it, saying, "If she had felt any such significance in her off-rhymes as the theory implies, we should expect to find her using them chiefly to voice her moods of doubt and dismay and returning to full rhyme in her positive and ecstatic moments. But no such correlation between rhyme and mood is observable." Yet a study of the rhymes in all of Emily Dickinson's nearly two thousand poems, now published by Thomas H. Johnson, who has arranged them as accurately as is possible in order of composition, is revealing. Of the approximately two hundred poems using perfect rhyme exclusively the greatest number were composed in the poet's early period, before 1861. In that group approximately fifty poems--one quarter



of the whole--contain perfect rhyme throughout, a much greater proportion than in any other period. Johnson, who has had the opportunity to study all extant Dickinson manuscripts, says that "the quality of tenseness and prosodic skill uniformly present in the poems of 1861 - 1862 bears scant likeness to the conventionality of subject and treatment in the poems of 1858 - 1859." It was during the years 1861 - 1862 that her attachment for the supposed inspirer of her hopeless love was at its height. Of the four hundred forty-odd poems written in that period - her period of maturest art and greatest production - only some twenty employ perfect rhyme exclusively. It would appear, then that her use of imperfect rhyme is roughly coincident with two important developments in her life; her emotional crisis and the mastery of her poetic technique. About this time came her almost complete withdrawal from society. Evidently the tensions which developed at that time were never fully relaxed. The twenty perfectly rhymed poems of this period, are, with only one exception, unimportant epigrams not born of her overwrought state of mind. The more than four hundred others, among them some of her greatest accomplishments, make some use of irregular rhymes. Practically all of Emily Dickinson's finest poems are to some extent expressive of her emotional turmoil. She was not moved to speak poetically by the calm one finds in many of her contemporaries. There is an "element of blank" in her cries of ecstasy as well as in her cries of pain.



If Emily Dickinson had been able to find solace in an unquestioning religious faith, as John Donne did in later life, her mind would perhaps have found a measure of peace. But, though she wrote many poems on the subject of belief in God and immortality, so many of them express a fundamental doubt that one is forced to conclude that she never found religion the steady anchor that she sought. She had to wrestle with her faith, but unlike Jacob, who, after wrestling with the angel "Found he had worsted God," she never overcame her own uncertainties. Her God was not One on whom she could cast her burden:

Of Course - I prayed -  
And did God care?  
He Cared as much as on the Air  
A Bird - had stamped her foot -  
And cried "Give Me" -  
My Reason - Life -  
I had not had - but for Yourself -  
'Twere better Charity  
To leave me in the Atom's Tomb -  
Merry, and Nought, and gay, and numb -  
Than this smart Misery. J376

Evidently to Emily Dickinson it was not better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Her disillusionment struck too deep to be so easily assuaged.



In scores of poems she describes her soul searchings, but in none more directly than in a letter she wrote after the death of the man whom it is believed she loved with such a hopeless love. Writing to a clergyman, she asks, "Is immortality true?" After years of soul-searching she wants to know whether other searchers have seen farther into the Unknowable than she. His answer is evasive: "---- a thousand lines of evidence converge toward it; and I believe it. It is all I can say."<sup>38</sup> Evidently the reassurance she sought was not to be obtained. This kind of uncertainty is what one feels in so many of the poems of her mature period. They are agitated in thought as well as in form.

There can be little doubt that this inescapable uncertainty colors even the most ecstatic of her poems. Even as she contemplated the joys of life, she was aware of how ephemeral they were; therefore she felt that it would be incongruous to use a conventional verse-form in dealing with them. It is for this reason that so many of the editorial emendations to which her first publications were subjected are so insidious. One of her deservedly famous poems is:

I taste a liquor never brewed -  
From Tankards scooped in Pearl -  
Not all the Frankfort Berries  
Yield such an Alcohol!



Inebriate of Air - am I -

And Debauchee of Dew -

Reeling - thro endless summer days -

From inns of Molten Blue -

When "Landlords" turn the drunken Bee

Out of the Foxglove's door -

When Butterflies - renounce their "drams" -

I shall but drink the more!

Till Seraphs swing their snowy Hats -

And Saints - to windows run -

To see the little Tippler

From Manzanilla come! J214

The whole is a subtle blending of regularity and irregularity, of the expected and the unexpected. It is written in the familiar Common Metre, which alternates iambic tetrameter with iambic trimeter, but Emily Dickinson breaks the pattern in three ways. In the first and last stanzas the rhymes are suspended and the third lines lack one accent. In the second the only significant variation (not counting the delicate irregularity of the rhyme in Dew - Blue) is the misplacement of the accent in the beginning of the third line. The third stanza is regular except for the transposition of accented and unaccented syllables at the beginning of the second line. Thus one gets an impression of unsteady steadiness,



of an attempt at straightness marred by occasional waverings. Could one expect anything else from a poem about a "Tippler" who goes "Reeling - thro endless summer days-"?

Yet it is this poem which prompted one of the most famous faux pas of the many tinkerers who have sought to "refine" Emily Dickinson's poems. Thomas Bailey Aldrich suggested this revision of the first stanza:

I taste a liquor never brewed  
In vats upon the Rhine;  
No tankard ever held a draught  
Of alcohol like mine.<sup>39</sup>

"I have ventured to desecrate this stanza," he says, with that dry mock that so many critics assume, "by tossing a rhyme into it --- and here print the lyric, hoping the reader will not accuse me of overvaluing it." As Whicher wryly adds, "Aldrich is forever safe from the supposition that he could distinguish between lemonade and faery wine."

A good many of Emily Dickinson's poems have been published from rough worksheet drafts, and it is impossible to know how they may have been reshaped had their author finished them. But those which she left as completely realized show that she was keenly sensitive to all tonal devices and considered them carefully in making her meticulous revisions. She rarely wrote a poem without



rhyme, and almost as rarely one with only perfect rhyme. The variations she imposed upon a basic pattern emphasize the importance which rhyme had for her in reflecting the total message of a poem. She once said that she wrote poetry because it gave her courage, just as the little boy whistles to keep up his courage when passing the graveyard. It was an emotional outlet for a troubled spirit, and the fact that it displays a tortuousness of form ought not to come as a surprise. She did not react against rhyme as if it were a limitation but extended its use so as to achieve unprecedented effects. True rhyme had a definite place in her attempts at aural suggestiveness, but it was used in conjunction with many subtle irregularities. The clash between perfect and imperfect rhymes was another variable that she could manipulate so as to create metaphysical surprise and shock. In all these ingenious innovations Emily Dickinson was pointing the way to modern thinking on the subject of rhyme.



## Chapter IV

### "THE ART OF BOARDS:" METRE, RHYTHM, AND VERSE-MUSIC IN THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON

A characteristic feature of metaphysical poetry has been, except in the case of George Herbert, its use of free, irregular rhythms. Its earliest critic, Dr. Samuel Johnson, complained that the modulation in the verses of John Donne and his followers was so imperfect that they were "only found to be verses by counting the syllables." In modern poetry, of course, freedom from classical rules has been carried to an extent unprecedented in the most unconventional of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry. Between the two periods is Emily Dickinson, whose genius as an innovator lay not in disregarding traditional metres but in working out new adaptations and arrangements of them. She used metre, as she used rhyme, to achieve meaningful contrasts between regularity and irregularity.

For a study of metrics, Emily Dickinson had access to two classic books in her father's library: Watts's Christian Psalmody and his collection of The Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs.<sup>40</sup> In these she could read explanations of the basic hymn metres, together with instructions on how effects were best to be achieved. She must have learned her lessons well, for nearly all of her poems use one or another of the forms there suggested, and in her formative



years up to 1861 she did not once employ metres not found in Watts. What she preferred to do was to experiment with variations and new combinations, rather than to invent new forms. As Thomas H. Johnson says, "Her great contribution to English prosody was that she perceived how to gain new effects by exploring the possibilities within traditional metric patterns."<sup>41</sup>

The graphic representation of metre traditionally accepts four kinds of poetic feet, iambic, trochaic, dactylic and anapaestic, the first three of which were most frequently used in the hymnology that Emily Dickinson would have studied in her source book. The basic iambic metres are Common Metre, alternately eight and six syllables to the line; Long Metre, eight syllables to each line; and Short Metre, two lines of six followed by one of eight and then one of six. These could be combined in four ways to make longer stanzas: Common Particular Metre (which has the metric beat 8, 8, 6, 8, 8, 6); Short Particular (6, 6, 8, 6, 6, 8); Sevens and Sixes (7, 6, 7, 6) and Sixes. The principal trochaic metres are Sevens, Eights and Sevens, Eights and Fives, Sevens and Fives, and Sixes. The dactylic lines most frequently seen are Elevens, Elevens and Tens, and Tens and Nines. What Emily Dickinson did was to impose original and intricately varied combinations upon these traditional patterns so as to produce wholly new and unexpected effects. From these combinations resulted the irregularities which led some critics to call her verse "undisciplined," and some editors



to revise it to make it more "suitable" for publication.

First, it is worth noting that a considerable number of Emily Dickinson's poems do have a regular, unvaried metre. These include many of her less important ones as well as several that are among her greatest achievements. She did not adhere to a regular metric scheme simply because it was a traditionally accepted one; nor did she depart from it merely because she felt that regularity, as such, was bad. What she did was to let the thought and mood dictate the form. In poems where she was merely making a quiet observation, she often adopted one of the traditional metres and did not deviate from it. However, when composing a poem of intense emotion - a dramatic lyric - she introduced variations in sharp contrast to the basic pattern. The following sentimental description illustrates her quiet, reflective mood. It is in Common Metre:

The morns are meeker than they were--

The nuts are getting brown--

The berry's cheek is plumper--

The Rose is out of town.

The Maple wears a gayer scarf--

The field a scarlet gown--

Lest I sh'd be old fashioned

I'll put a trinket on. J12



The poem as a whole, though pleasing enough because of its quaint naiveté, leaves one quite unmoved. It is one of the poet's earliest works, but shows that she has already acquired a practiced facility in handling a conventional metre. The only irregularity is the shortening of a line by omitting an anticipated syllable, a device which Emily Dickinson later used with consummate skill.

Another early poem is "I never lost as much but twice," which was quoted in the second chapter. It also starts in Common Metre, but later varies it to suit a changing mood. The third line replaces the first iambic foot with a trochee, so as to emphasize the repetition of the important word "Twice." The second stanza is entirely trochaic. This metrical shift points up the contrast between past crises, which have been resolved, and the present one, which is just at its worst. The poem thus communicates in two ways, for the metrical arrangement enhances the meaning.

It is revealing of Emily Dickinson's method to compare the dreamy "The morns are meeker than they were" with another reverie written much later:

This quiet Dust was Gentlemen and Ladies  
And Lads and Girls--  
Was laughter and ability and Sighing  
And Frocks and Curls.



This Passive Place a Summer's nimble mansion  
Where Bloom and Bees  
Exist an Oriental Circuit  
Then cease, like these. *J813*

The mood is quiet and pensive, as in the other, but this time one is made to sense the poet's genuine emotion. The metrical pattern--iambic metre in elevens and fours--has no precedent in Watts's hymn-book. Unaccented syllables are used to end the long lines but unstressed syllables the short ones. To create the decelerating effect of the short rhyming lines, the poet has used long, sustained vowels in each accented word. The sense of hesitancy is achieved by this ingenious way of contrasting long lines and short ones, slow vowels and long ones. Once this novel pattern is established, it is adhered to. It is typical of Emily Dickinson's way of evolving new stanza forms from the elements of traditional ones.

In many cases she shows greater freedom within a given pattern. "We play at Paste," for example, derives part of its memorableness from the meaningful irregularities that occur in its basic iambic measure:

We play at Paste--  
Till qualified, for Pearl--  
Then, drop the Paste  
And deem ourself a fool--



The Shapes--though--were similar

And our new Hands

Learned Gem--Tactics--

Practicing Sands-- J 320

The first stanza is in regular iambic dimeters and trimeters, but the second is a complex of variations. Its roughness contrasts sharply with the smoothness of the preceding quatrain. Besides the spondee on "Shapes--Though--" there are hovering accents on the last syllable of "similar" and on "our new Hands" in the second line. The last two verses are a studied inversion, for there are accents on the two middle syllables of the one and on the first and last syllables of the other. The poem as a whole may be taken as a resumé of the way the poet learned her craft. The first stanza symbolized the necessary mental discipline of mastering rules; the second shows how an expert can allow the meaning to shape the form without appearing wayward.

What Emily Dickinson and the early metaphysical poets did was to introduce speech rhythms into poetry. I do not mean that they disregarded metre, but that they used it along with the cadences of unmeasured speech to achieve contrast. Between the regular periodicity of the one and the unmetrical rhythm of the other there is a kind of interplay, a counterpoint, which becomes an additional means of communicating mood and thought.



Rhythm, like rhyme, cannot be separated from meaning. A poem must be conceived as an artistic entity, composed of a number of mutually sustaining elements so combined as to produce a unified whole. The actual sounds produced in reading a poem are not the poem. Its mode of existence is a composite of meaning, overall form, imagery, the genre to which it belongs, its visual appearance, and even the literary milieu of its author as a shaping agent. Iambic metre, for example, does not guarantee a certain kind of verse. It has been used with equal success in a great variety of poems, some sad, some gay, some ponderous, some sprightly. There is no absolute quality in the iambus that, by itself, conveys a mood. How it is used in combination with other poetic elements determines its effect.

Emily Dickinson chose iambic as the basic metre more often than any other, yet achieved greatly different effects with it. It is the metre of a poem quoted in the preceding chapter, "I taste a liquor never brewed--" in which the mood is one of intoxication with life. Iambic is also the metre of many of her most sombre poems on suffering and death, such as:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes--  
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs--  
The stiff Heart questions was it He, that bore,  
And Yesterday, or Centuries before?



The Feet, mechanical, go round--

A wooden way

Of Ground, or Air, or Ought--

Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone--

This is the Hour of Lead--

Remembered, if outlived,

As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow--

First--Chill--then Stupor--then the letting go-- J341

The mood is created by deftly varying the rhythm. Each line of the opening stanza is in iambic pentameter, the only irregularity being the inversion of the stressed and unstressed syllables in the beginning of the first line; it is coldly ceremonious, mechanical and stiff. But once the idea of nervous calm following great pain is introduced, the rhythm changes. What would the movements of a person in such a situation be like? They would be "a Wooden way." This is set off as a significant thought, and made a separate line, just as it would be in free verse, where all line lengths are thus determined by thought. The mechanical actions of a person in this unfortunate situation are all described in shorter lines to emphasize the plodding, numbed movements. The last two lines return to the rhythmic pattern of the opening stanza, just as the idea in them returns to the thoughts in the mind of the sufferer. Most poems of Emily Dickinson which give, at first reading, a jarring impression of roughness will



be seen on closer examination to have some similar variation used to attract attention to an important idea or to reinforce a mood. It is Emily Dickinson's way of contrasting the rhythms of speech and the regularities of conventional metre. In a dramatic lyric such a contrast helps to achieve artistic tension.

What is true of rhythm is also true of the actual sounds within a line or stanza. The inherent quality of any sound is completely neutral. There is no feeling attached to the sound of a, for instance, if uttered by itself, without context. It is only when used in conjunction with each other that sounds become meaningful, and it is by manipulation of this relationship that all sound-effects are produced. Onomatopoeia results from putting the sounds of letters together so as to imitate a recognizable sound, such as "cuckoo." Rhythm and metre result from a systematic arrangement of recurring sound patterns, in English of accented and unaccented syllables. Rhyme, assonance, and alliteration result from arranging identical sounds in some sort of sequence. All these effects are influenced, furthermore, by the meanings of the words they compose. These words already have a connotation for the reader because he has previously seen them used in a certain way and has a conditioned response to them. If the preconceived emotional overtones which a word has are in harmony with the verse-music produced by the line, the reader is soothed; if not he is shocked. This



sense of shock is deliberately used by Emily Dickinson and other metaphysical poets for purposes of dramatic contrast.

How sounds and even identical words derive their evocative power from the metrical and semantic associations within a particular context can be illustrated by Emily Dickinson's use of the simple word "stone" in three different poems:

- (1)   How happy is the little Stone  
          That rambles in the Road alone,  
          And doesn't care about Careers  
          And Exigencies never fears - *J1510*
- (2)   The Feet, mechanical, go round -  
          A Wooden way  
          Of Ground, or Air, or Ought  
          Regardless grown,  
          A Quartz contentment, like a stone - *J341*
- (3)   I've known her - from an ample nation -  
          Choose One -  
          Then - close the Valves of her attention -  
          Like Stone - *J303*

Though all three employ the same fundamental iambic beat, their moods are quite different. The word "stone" effects a rhyme in each case, but only the first adheres to a traditional form, in this case the familiar Long Metre. In each of the others the rhymes



embrace one long line and one very short one - a device which has recently been exploited with startling effect by E.E. Cummings and Ogden Nash. But in Dickinson's poems, (2) and (3), the connotation of "stone" brings to mind its hardness and obduracy, which make it a symbol of unyielding hardness. The relation of the word stone to other words in (2) and (3) is such that one is made to concentrate on it and to stress its vowel sound. The monotonous regularity of the first poem becomes all the more apparent when this poem is compared with the last two, in which metre, form, sound, and meaning complement each other to create dramatic intensity.

In symbolist poetry these different strata are given an even greater prominence. Direct verbal or expository communication is minimized and suggestiveness emphasized to such an extent that the true meaning cannot be learned except by taking account of the indirect message of the images, the sound-effects, and the subtle interplay of these elements. A poem, then, cannot be "explained" merely by paraphrasing it. Metaphysical poetry does not go so far as to dispense with the straightforward exposition but enriches it with images of sound and sense. Emily Dickinson's "We play at Paste," previously quoted, is a good example. In it the paste, the gem, and the sands are visual symbols for abstract ideas, and the suggestive rhythms are aural symbols. Throughout, the tyro is contrasted with the expert, and the metrical arrangement of the



seventh line, referring to the one, is the exact opposite of that of the eighth, referring to the other.

A more complete integration of figures of sound and figures of sense is seen in a number of poems which make use of synesthesia, the evoking of feeling through one of the physical senses by means of another. For instance, in "A route of Evanescence" the description of the hummingbird includes the line, "A resonance of emerald," in which the whirring is suggested by the onomatopoeic effect of the line in conjunction with the color of emerald. Elsewhere Emily Dickinson speaks of "The sunrise' yellow noise," "the heft of Cathedral Tunes," a fly's "blue uncertain tumbling buzz," "a narrow wind," and "that white sustenance - / Despair -." Such figures are, of course, just refinements of the metaphysical conceit as a means of producing dramatic surprise and tension. But when combined with imitative sound patterns, as here, they are all the more arresting.

The use of traditional metres as a foil to accentuate significant variations is nowhere more strikingly evident in Emily Dickinson's work than in her love poems. The early ones, composed while she was still in love with the idea of being in love, are generally more regular and less original in form, than the ones which were inspired by that shattering crisis which made her turn to writing poetry as a means of preserving her sanity. This very early one, for example, is conventional and uninspired:



The Rose did caper on her cheek -

Her Boddice rose and fell -

Her Pretty speech - like drunken men -

Did stagger pitiful -

Her fingers fumbled at her work -

Her needle would not go -

What ailed so smart a little Maid -

It puzzled me to know -

Till opposite - I spied a cheek

That bore another Rose -

Just opposite - Another speech

That like the Drunkard goes -

A Vest that like her Boddice, danced -

To the immortal tune -

Till those two troubled - little clocks

Ticked softly into one. *J208*

The unvaried Common Metre has a flatness of rhythm that is hardly above the level of mere doggerel. The imagery, too, is trite and inconsistent. The lovers' emotion is in no way communicated to the reader; at best one affords them a brief smile of amusement.

By 1861 the poet's emotion must have been intense, for in that and the following year she wrote all of her most passionate



love lyrics. This is also the period in which there appears the greatest freedom in the use of suggestive rhythms, as in this erotic poem:

Wild Nights - Wild Nights!

Were I with thee

Wild Nights should be

Our luxury!

Futile - the Winds -

To a Heart in port -

Done with <sup>the</sup> Compass -

Done with the Chart!

Rowing in Eden -

Ah, the Sea!

Might I but moor - Tonight -

In Thee! J249

Such a piece is beyond comment. One need say only that the writer is no longer the same detached versifier who wrote "The Rose did caper on her cheek -" It is about this same time that she wrote such impassioned utterances as "I got so I could hear his name," "What would I give to see his face," "How sick to wait," and many more. In all there is evidence of the greatest artistry in the handling of rhythms. Clearly the emotional crisis, which all her biographers agree must have occurred about this time, caused her to write as if pursued by furies. One need not go to any external



evidence to show that she was very much agitated at this time.<sup>42</sup>

By late 1862 the poet begins to have her overwrought feelings under control, and a calmer tone appears in the love poems. She is able to look back upon her hopeless love affair more philosophically:

Of all the souls that stand create -  
I have elected - One -  
When sense from spirit - files away -  
And subterfuge - is done -  
When that which is - and that which was -  
Apart - intrinsic - stand -  
And this brief Tragedy of Flesh -  
Is shifted - like a sand -  
When Figures show their royal Front -  
And Mists - are carved away,  
Behold the Atom - I preferred -  
To all the lists of Clay! J664

The poem is unusual among her later works for its regularity, but the delicate modulation of sound and rhythm is admirably suited to the mood of quiet resignation. The passion of the earlier poem has been sublimated into spirituality. Here the poet handles her favorite Common Metre with an artistry that bears little relationship to the jog in "The Rose did caper on her cheek."



Though Emily Dickinson weathered the emotional storm of 1861 - 62, she by no means found life an easy calm. As was pointed out in Chapter III, she found that all life's spiritual and emotional aspects were beset with uncertainties and paradoxes. The frustrations she encountered are reflected in the rhythms as well as in the thought of her poetry. More and more of the poems from 1862 on are religious and psychological soul-searchings. The writer was expressing in poetry her attempt to adjust to life in a world where ultimate truth was unobtainable. Her obsession with death and dying, mentioned in Chapter II, shows how dissatisfied she was with man's inability to find answers to his profoundest and most perplexing questions. The gaps in human knowledge were always at the most vital points:

To fill a Gap  
Insert the Thing that caused it -  
Block it up  
With Other - and 'twill yawn the more -  
You cannot solder an Abyss  
With Air.     *J546*

These inescapable dilemmas that she felt were inherent in human life give her poetry a curious doubleness of vision. Things are conceived as opposites, a fact which explains her bringing together the most dissimilar images as well as the most discordant rhythms. As she says,



Experience is the Angled Road  
Preferred against the Mind  
By - Paradox - the Mind itself -  
Presuming it to lead  
Quite opposite... J910

Joys become joys only as one has the experience of sorrow as a  
foil against which to realize them:

Water is taught by thirst  
Land--by the Oceans passed.  
Transport--by throe--  
Peace--by its battles told--  
Love, by Memorial Mold--  
Birds, by the Snow. J135

The world's curious sense of values she often commented on  
in her verse epigrams. Some of these are as regular as traditional  
folk tunes, for example:

It's such a little thing to weep--  
So short a thing to sigh --  
And yet--by Trades--the size of these  
We men and women die! J189

Elsewhere she soliloquizes upon a state of affairs which has worried  
many serious thinkers in our own age of mass conformity:



Much Madness is divinest Sense--  
To a discerning Eye--  
Much Sense--the starkest Madness--  
'Tis the Majority  
In this, as All, prevail--  
Assent--and you are sane--  
Demur--you're straightway dangerous--  
And handled with a Chain-- J435

Here Emily Dickinson employs a favorite device, that of altering the metre at a crucial point to emphasize the thought. Instead of giving the fifth line the full eight iambic feet, which it should have if the regular Common Metre were followed, she shortens it into a trimeter. Three short lines therefore come together. These three constitute one term of a significant contrast, completed in the last part, which returns to the longer tetrameter line.

The result of Emily Dickinson's inability to become adjusted to an imperfect and incomprehensible world was, of course, her withdrawal into privacy, where she could wrestle with her problems in freedom from the toll which social contacts took of her. But she was quite aware of the dramatic irony of such a withdrawal:

Renunciation - is a piercing Virtue -  
The letting go  
A Presence - for an Expectation -  
Not now -  
The putting out of Eyes -



Just Sunrise -

Lest Day -

Day's Great Progenitor -

Outvie

Renunciation - is the Choosing

Against itself -

Itself to justify

Unto itself -

When larger function -

Make that appear -

Smaller - that Covered Vision - Here - J745

The ruggedness of the rhythm is expressive of the contradictions implicit in the renunciation which is the subject of the piece. The irregular arrangement of accents and the inconsistent line length are as perverse as the "Choosing / Against itself." This is the same technique of employing speech rhythms in poetry that one sees in Donne and the other seventeenth century metaphysicals. It has since been much more extensively exploited by Eliot, MacLeish and others during the modern metaphysicals.

One final example will show how subtle are the effects which can be achieved by adopting a given metrical theme and playing variations upon it. The poem "There's a certain Slant of Light"



was quoted in part in Chapter II but deserves to be studied in its entirety in this connection.

There's a certain Slant of light,

Winter Afternoons -

That oppresses, like the Heft

Of Cathedral Tunes -

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us -

We can find no scar,

But internal difference,

Where the Meanings, are -

None may teach it - Any -

'Tis the Seal Despair -

An imperial affliction

Sent us of the Air -

When it comes, the Landscape listens -

Shadows - hold their breath -

When it goes, 'tis like the Distance

On the look of Death - J 258

The first stanza establishes the pattern: first and third lines of seven syllables, four of them accented, with alternate lines of five syllables. In the second <sup>stanza,</sup> however, the opening line lacks the last accent, so that the final unstressed syllable seems to anticipate the beginning of the second line, where there is an



accent. In the first stanza the third line concludes with the fourth accented syllable, but the corresponding line in the second has only a slight, hovering accent, and that of the third an unmistakable feminine ending. The effect is one of increasing hesitation. The last stanza is a final resolution of the three preceding, for it reviews all the modifications used, and evolves a new unity of form that recaptures all the delicate modulations of the different parts. This metrical metamorphosis seems peculiarly appropriate to shadows which "hold their breath." The movement of the last quatrain has a lurking hesitancy quite in keeping with the mysterious feeling one gets of the "certain slant of light."

From a study of such poems as this last, one can infer the reason why Emily Dickinson could not forsake traditional forms entirely, nor could she adhere to them rigidly, as her literary "preceptor," T. W. Higginson, suggested. Her genius lay in knowing how to exploit the possibilities for variety within existing patterns. She contrasts the regular and the irregular, the expected and the unexpected, and in this way enhances the dramatic quality of her verse. In this type of metrical artistry she stands with the greatest.



Chapter V

EMILY DICKINSON'S PLACE AMONG OTHER METAPHYSICAL POETS

The term "metaphysical" as a designation for a distant type of poetry has its difficulties, for it does not mean quite the same thing to all people. In this study it is used to describe those poems which employ certain recognizable qualities of metaphor, rhyme and rhythm. Its metaphors are characterized by an unusual disparity between the terms of the comparison; its verse music is often harshly irregular, rather than smoothly melodious, because of its refusal to conform to classical ideas of true rhyme and metre. It rests on an intrinsic duality because it brings together such disparate elements as passion and wit, reverence and impiousness, sublimity and worldliness. The justification of such seeming perverseness is the greater suggestiveness and dramatic tension so achieved. To this purpose the imagery and verse music work as adjuncts to the literal meaning of the words.

One reason why the greatness of Emily Dickinson was so long in being recognized is that the literary world did not at first know how to judge her unconventional style. Its strange conceits, its off-rhymes and jarring rhythms were misunderstood. On the one hand she has been belittled for her "lack of control" and her "hit-or-miss grammar, sterile rhythms and appalling rhymes."<sup>43</sup> On the other she has been patronized for her novelties of style, and some edi-



tors have deliberately played up her idiosyncrasies. She has been made to appear quaint, or unpolished, or eccentric.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, her first editors could not resist tampering with her poems to regularize the rhymes and rhythms. It is only in comparatively recent years that her works have been published unamended and allowed to stand entirely on their own merits.

In a metaphysical poem, even more than in any other, the total effect is produced not by the words alone but by the words in conjunction with other poetic devices. It is essentially dramatic in nature and depends for its effects upon the clash between different elements. This clash generates the tension which is characteristic of such a poem. Previous chapters have tried to show how the rhymes and rhythms are used to fortify the thought and arouse a feeling. The total impact of all these effects constitutes the real idea or "meaning" of the poem. It has been suggested that a poet is not so much a communicator of meaning to the reader as he is a maker, for he "explores, consolidates, and 'forms' the total experience that is the poem."<sup>45</sup> As has already been explained, the typical metaphysical poem leads one to further thought; there is an intellectual element that causes one to be an active, creative reader. One's thinking is stimulated by the total effect of all the various elements, its rhythms, its connotations, its euphony or cacophony, as well as the bare denotative power of its words.



Yet, whatever are the ways in which the poet achieves these results, and however subtle, they are, after all, nothing but manipulations of language. The poet, removed from his reader, perhaps, by years of time and miles of distance, is still able to produce a reaction in him. That is the magic of poetry. That is also the reason why it is sacrilege on the part of an editor to present a writer's work in such a way as to make it conform to some preconceived notion. It is only recently that Emily Dickinson has been freed from such "creative" editing.

Included in the total concept of any poem are, besides the words with all their varied connotations and denotations, a number of other elements which add to or modify the impact of the words themselves. These include all those elements which go to make up the mode of existence of a poem, as mentioned in Chapter IV. It is clear that a reader's total reaction will be affected to some extent even by the physical appearance or arrangement of words on a page. Such writers as E. E. Cummings, Humbert Wolfe, and Ogden Nash frequently heighten the bizarre effect of their verses by unusual line arrangements. Nor is this purely a modern phenomenon. The eighteenth-century novelist, Laurence Sterne, obtained unusual effects by using blank or shaded pages, or by setting certain expressions off in special borders. Earlier, the metaphysical poet, George Herbert, had written poems in the shapes of eggs and birds. Joseph Addison in one of his Spectator papers speaks of



having read ancient Greek poems shaped like axes, altars or shepherds' pipes.<sup>46</sup> Such a device may be, as Addison says, false wit, but it affects the total impression one gets. A reader cannot ignore it. It is part of the meaning of the poem.

Many of the irregularities which some have presumed to "correct" in the works of Emily Dickinson are in the same way a part of the poet's vehicle of communication. They are less radical but similar in purpose. The importance which she attached even to such matters of outward form as punctuation is well illustrated by her exasperation at the way publishers handled those few poems which appeared in print during her lifetime. The famous poem about the snake ("A narrow Fellow in the Grass") was published anonymously and, apparently, without her consent, but the text was changed. As she wrote the poem, the opening stanza reads:

A narrow Fellow in the Grass  
Occasionally rides--  
You may have met Him--did you not  
His notice sudden is-- J986

The published edition prints the third and fourth lines thus:

You may have met him--did you not,  
His notice instant is.

Commenting on this printing, Emily Dickinson says in a letter to her friend, the critic, T. W. Higginson:



" . . . it [the poem] was robbed of me--defeated too of the third line by the punctuation. The third and fourth were one--I had told you I did not print --I feared you might think me ostensible."

It is clear that the poet intended the lines to stand exactly as they were because in that form they expressed her meaning most accurately. Evidently all details of form and arrangement were to contribute something to the poetic expression.<sup>47</sup>

A noticeable quality of many Dickinson poems is the profuse use of dashes. These, too, have been changed to more orthodox marks of punctuation in some editions. It would be difficult to defend every instance of her use of dashes in preference to more usual punctuation marks. Yet they do affect the rhythm--and therefore the mood--by isolating words of special significance or by breaking the regular movement, and are one of her devices, deliberately used to help create the intended impression. The following poem is a good example.

Sweet--safe--Houses--

Glad--gay--Houses--

Sealed so stately tight--

Lids of Steel--on Lids of Marble--

Locking Bare feet out--



Brooks of Plush--in Banks of Satin

Not so softly fall

As the laughter--and the whisper--

From their People Pearl--

No Bald Death--affront their Parlors--

No Bold Sickness come

To deface their Stately Treasures--

Anguish--and the Tomb--

Hum by--in Muffled Coaches--

Lest they--wonder Why--

Any--for the Press of Smiling--

Interrupt--to die-- *J457*

The effect of hesitancy produced by the dashes is peculiarly appropriate to the tone of gentle mockery used to describe the polite artificiality of the people who live in these "Sweet--safe--Houses." Some of this effect would be lost if the dashes were omitted.

Yet in many instances in the early editions of Dickinson's poems just such emendations were made, to give them a more conventional appearance. One famous poem thus changed begins:

The Soul Selects her own Society--

Then--shuts the Door-- *J303*

Some editions print the second line without the dash after "Then." It is to the poet's great credit that this poem is successful even



with such changes. The use of words is such that the effect is achieved by the way in which the thought is worded, though the suggestive overtones may be eliminated.

The inherently dramatic quality of a metaphysical poem is enhanced by playing off the regularity adopted as a pattern for the whole against the variations and exceptions. A sense of strain or conflict results. The conflict is emphasized if the irregularity is found not only in the ideas but also in the rhythm, rhyme, imagery and line arrangement. All these aspects contribute to the "cracking of metrical patterns" and the "yoking by violence" which Dr. Samuel Johnson spoke of. There can be little doubt that they were thus purposefully used by Emily Dickinson. To regularize one of her poems by changing it is to defeat the poem of one of its means of communication. The altered version cannot have quite the effect its author intended.

The subtle ways in which a poet uses words to convey more than their literal meanings are treated by Cleanth Brooks in The Well-Wrought Urn.<sup>48</sup> He examines the devices used in Gray's famous "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard." Though this is often considered a classic example of straightforward treatment of poetic material, Brooks shows that there are ironies and paradoxes even here. The language does make use of poetic artifice to produce the mood the author is striving to achieve. It would be naive, he maintains, to believe that even in this straightforward



poem, the author attempted nothing more than to express the prose meaning in the measured language of verse. For this, bare prose would serve as well. The poet was really employing the same devices that are so much more exploited in metaphysical poetry.

Metaphor, analogy, and some sort of indirection are indispensable to a poet in creating any but the most obvious emotion. The poems which stir the reader and haunt his memory--those which achieve the so-called magic of poetry--are often the hardest to explain. The total effect is much more than the actual "meaning." And it is achieved by evoking fresh, potent images--images that force the reader to re-create in his own mind something of what the poet created in his. "Kubla Khan," for example, is generally recognized as a very evocative poem. In it the metaphors and images are called up by striking new combinations of ideas. The novelty, the strangeness of the figures strikes the reader as paradoxical. He has never encountered such a juxtaposition before. The clash of ideas is therefore made all the more dramatic. This sort of dramatic shock is just what Emily Dickinson and the other metaphysical poets try to utilize as one level of poetic communication. The whole idea is vitalized if the dramatic clash of ideas and images is thus exploited as an adjunct to ordinary verbal expression.



The significance of this dramatic effect is well illustrated  
by this metaphysical poem by Emily Dickinson:

'Twas like a Maelstrom, with a notch,  
That nearer, every Day,  
Kept narrowing it's boiling Wheel  
Until the Agony

Toyed coolly with the final inch  
Of your delirious Hem--  
And you dropt, lost,  
When something broke--  
And let you from a Dream--

As if a Goblin with a Guage--  
Kept measuring the Hours--  
Until you felt your Second  
Weigh, helpless, in his Paws--

And not a Sinew--stirred--could help,  
And sense was setting numb--  
When God--remembered--and the Fiend  
Let go, then, Overcome--

As if your Sentence stood--pronounced--  
And you were frozen led  
From Dungeon's luxury of Doubt  
To Gibbets, and the Dead--



And when the Film had stitched your eyes

A Creature gasped "Reprieve"!

Which Anguish was the utterest--then--

To perish, or to live? J414

The poem describes a person undergoing a terrifying experience, compounded of fear, horror, and superstitious dread. The tension increases through three climaxes, leaving the victim at the end in a state of exhaustion, comparable to the emotional purgation one feels at the end of a tragic drama. The torture which the victim is made to feel is progressive in its intensity--as gradual and inexorable as the driving home of a screw. He sees with helpless, horrified fascination the approach of apparent doom, but is thrice reprieved, just when he seems to have reached the breaking-point. Finally, he is so exhausted and unnerved that to live is as great an anguish as to perish. The poem ends on this note of unresolved conflict.

The mood is engendered by a number of paradoxes. The clashing of superstitious, pagan and Christian images dramatizes the idea that the victim feels at the mercy of forces he cannot understand or cope with. The "Goblin with a Guage," [sic.] who seemed fiendishly bent on bringing him to the very highest pinnacle of torture, is contrasted with the Christian God, who finally "remembered." Is the fact that the victim was finally spared to be taken as an allegorical way of saying that the Christian God is, after all, omnipotent,



worthy of our faith? It is, again, "A Creature" which gives the final reprieve. Just what is the relation between the two supernatural forces referred to? One is uncertain. It can be said only that the Powers and Beings spoken of are embodiments of forces against which we struggle. Our helplessness in their grip is dramatized by the ironic juxtaposition of the idea of a compassionate God and that of a fiendish, inhuman power.

The sensuous words used are as paradoxical as the images. First there is the obvious contrast of heat and cold in the "boiling Wheel" which "Toyed coolly" with its victim and from which he was at last "frozen led." But there are more subtle suggestions, too. In the third stanza the Goblin is described as measuring the victim's hours of torture with a "Guage"; but the climactic point suggests that the crucial instant is "weighed." Later when the victim has almost reached the breaking-point, his sense is said to be "setting." This connotes all the inflexibility of natural law. The hopelessness of the victim's struggle is thus to be thought of in terms of laws over which he can have no control. He is the helpless victim of Fate. All the sense impressions and connotations emphasize the overwhelming nature of the experience.

The dramatic, paradoxical tone of the poem is further heightened by contrast between words which suggest eerie, transcendental ideas and those which are conspicuously mundane. Hard-headed, worldly



legal terms such as "sentence," "pronounced," and "reprieve" are used together with imaginative words such as "Goblin," "fiend," and "delirious." This is typical of the method of a metaphysical poet. The effect of this deliberate combination of unlike elements is to increase the tension and to produce shock. It is a dramatic device.

This poem is a good example of Emily Dickinson's uncanny power with words. The feeling here aroused is one of mounting intensity, leading to the sense of exhaustion, of "letting go" at the end. It is reminiscent of "After great pain, a formal feeling comes--" quoted in Chapter IV. Both poems describe the debilitating drain of harrowing experiences on a sensitive spirit. In both the steps leading to the final sense of crushed quietude are described in sensuous terms by linking together incongruous figures. This faculty for exacting the greatest evocative power from words is one of the distinctive qualities of Dickinson's style. Of course, all poets use words in richly suggestive ways, but Dickinson's great achievement is her ability to use them to produce a strained, dramatic effect. There is ever this surprising juxtaposition which produces new and startling combinations. No poet is more successful in conjuring up a whole state of mind with a few evocative words.

The psychological exploration of the poet's emotion in this poem gives it depth and dramatic force. As one reads it, he is



led to think and to analyze the experience and state of mind dealt with. In this respect it is typically a metaphysical poem, in which the characteristic duality of emotion and intellect is basic to the meaning or understanding which a reader gets from it. It is also illustrative of the way in which a metaphysical poet uses words to call up thoughts in the mind of the reader. Though it is an intensely emotional poem, it is far removed from the lyric simplicity which attempts to appeal to the emotions directly without dealing with philosophical or intellectual ideas at all. Words are so used in the poem that their connotations arouse thoughts as well as feelings in the mind. The various contrasts and paradoxes create a dramatic force that is wanting in lyrics which are mainly articulate emotion.

The power of many of Emily Dickinson's poems results from the startling directness with which she gets right to the essence of an idea. There is no circumlocution, no long description of places or circumstances, but only the stark facts. All of her poems are short, and her style is epigrammatic. Therefore, she must make every image, every word, as forceful and dramatic as possible. To convey the most meaning into the fewest words, she goes directly to the heart of the matter from the beginning, without preliminaries. This quality of her work can be seen in many pieces, such as the following:



Ample make this Bed--

Make this Bed with Awe--

In it wait till Judgment break

Excellent and Fair.

Be it's Mattress straight--

Be it's Pillow round--

Let no Sunrise' yellow noise

Interrupt this Ground-- *J 829*

The picture of a simple burial is here evoked by a few vivid details. The whole idea is conveyed by specific, homely facts-- facts which lead one to philosophize on death itself. But by the time one is ready for the generalization, the poem is finished; there are no philosophical ramblings in it. The poet has called up the thought, and one must generalize for himself. This is typical of Dickinson's brief, dramatic style. The concrete domestic imagery clashes ironically with the stupendous ideas of Judgment and Eternity. Out of this clash the author creates the mood and leads one to ponder these great questions in terms of homely, familiar reality. The matter is brought starkly and dramatically home to the reader.

Emily Dickinson conceives of ideas in terms of specific things and situations rather than generalizations. Like Robert Frost, she describes the most profound questions by means of examples



from her own New England environment. Unlike him, however, she refrains from extended discussions, and prefers to mention only enough to give the germ of her idea. Her view of the world is the antithesis of the "grand manner." In her poems she catches the least flickering of a leaf, sees a robin actually eat a worm. One flake of snow in deciding whether it will cross a rut is enough to evoke the mood of winter. Like Frost, she cuts through the accumulations of literary tradition to arrive directly at reality. She makes every description a dramatic vignette.

To Emily Dickinson God was a Telescope, who "Perennial beholds us." The epithet could well be applied to the poet herself, for she found in the smallest things and creatures sufficient basis for contemplation of the immensities. In one poem she jokingly says,

"Faith is a fine invention  
When Gentlemen can see--  
But Microscopes are prudent  
In an Emergency.     *J 185*

In her poetry she preferred to use the microscope of her own aphoristic mind to express great ideas in arresting terms. She could link together ideas of God and the most specific, down-to-earth details in a way that brings one up short with the realization that a deep truth has been summed up in a single flashing metaphor. It is this quality that makes many of her verses so startling.



The great paradox of Emily Dickinson's works arises from the fact that though she outwardly renounced the world and lived a life of seclusion, she found in her own narrow world ample scope for studying the great questions of human life and destiny. To her the little dramas of her home and garden were as illustrative of life's tragedies and ironies as the lives of kings were to Shakespeare or the deeds of gods and heroes to the Greeks. Though she studied homelier subjects, she dealt with the same universal questions.

A favorite theme is death. It is never dealt with in a general, discursive way but in terms of specific persons and circumstances. Dying is described in dramatic terms, by dealing with the acts and thoughts that give the mood of the occasion--sometimes from the point of view of the one dying, sometimes from that of the bystanders. "I felt a funeral in my brain," she says in one poem. In "I heard a Fly buzz--when I died--" she imagines the awful moment when one passes from life and awareness to death and oblivion. This description of the unknowable she achieves by suggesting the details that one would be conscious of at such a moment. Like other great crises in life, it is beset with harassing, practical questions which force themselves upon one's mind at even the most critical moments. An artist at his greatest moment of inspiration must still cope with such practical problems as the manipulation of his tools in order to record his inspired



thoughts. Just so the dying person is aware of the petty details of mortal life, even in his last moments of consciousness. This attempt to probe into the most inscrutable mysteries by studying the most practical trifles can be seen in Emily Dickinson's way of evoking the actual feeling of death in this poem:

How many times these low feet staggered--

Only the soldered mouth can tell---

Try--can you stir the awful rivet--

Try--can you lift the hasps of steel!

Stroke the cool forehead--hot so often--

Lift--if you care--the listless hair--

Handle the adamantine fingers

Never a thimble--more--shall wear--

Buzz the dull flies--on the chamber window--

Brave--shines the sun through the freckled pane--

Fearless--the cobweb swings from the ceiling--

Indolent Housewife--in Daisies--lain! J187

This poem well illustrates how great emotional intensity can be combined with understatement. The theme is one with which many poets have grappled. Dickinson's treatment of it conveys the awe and poignant finality by means of the homeliest details of housekeeping: no longer will the fastidious housewife be able to clean the "freckled pane." The seriousness of the theme and



the simple worldliness of the images are in ironic, dramatic contrast. This device is often brilliantly used to heighten the tension of poems in which she deals with the profoundest of questions. She typically seeks ultimate knowledge not in the infinitely great but in the infinitely small.

It was Emily Dickinson's desire to state her thoughts as succinctly and dramatically as possible that led her to develop that compression and severe economy of words that is her trademark. She never expatiates. Rather, she calls up an idea with a few daring images, but by the time the reader has realized their significance, the poem is finished. He must generalize for himself. The point is made sharply and dramatically by metaphorical representation, rather than by direct statement. By this indirect method she is able to compress *much* thought into her epigrammatic stanzas. It is a style that suits her penchant for terse, suggestive lines which cause one to think. One never feels the satiety that comes from reading a long, exhaustive study; one is given an idea to ponder, rather than an explanation that attempts to explore all the possibilities latent in it.

This use of any device that would evoke thought and feeling in the mind of the reader makes Emily Dickinson a link between the moderns and the seventeenth-century metaphysicals. It also makes her a rebel against the accepted traditions of her own day. Like



the modern post-Impressionists, Imagists, and Surrealists, she exploited all the resources of rhythm, rhyme, imagery and subtle indirection to produce her effects. To her--as to the early metaphysicals and the moderns--the structure of a poem was not just a frame on which to hang the meaning. One structure or combination of rhyming and rhythmical effects would not be equally suitable for all moods of poetry. The structure evolved from the mood and thought. Therefore perfect rhymes and measured rhythms had to be broken in different ways to suit different moods and meanings in different poems. The same more-or-less predictable patterns would not do for all poems. To achieve contrasts and greater dramatic stress, these elements were varied so that the effects of unexpected deviations from a regular pattern would create surprise.

The poets of the modern metaphysical revival have carried the exploitation of form as an integral part of the total content to much greater extremes than did Emily Dickinson. The most famous example is T. S. Eliot. In such poems as "The Hollow Men" he depends very much on the manipulation of line, stanza, rhythm, rhyme, repetition and aural effects to create the impression of hopelessness and despair. Without these effects the total meaning of the poem could not be grasped. Further, the paraphrasable "meaning" of the stanzas, taken one after the other, would not give the true meaning of the poem as a whole. This poem, then, represents a high degree of integration of form and content.



No poem of Emily Dickinson's goes so far as this by Eliot. But her poems tend in the same direction. One cannot expect to get the real meaning without taking account of the form as well as the verbal content. Dickinson prefers to adopt a basic stanzaic form and to achieve her effects by variations in rhyme and rhythm. Her innovations of form are much less revolutionary than Eliot's. Nevertheless, they were so great as to be considered serious imperfections by the traditionalists of her day. Her earliest editors failed to understand their purpose and were therefore led to make "corrections." A modern reader can appreciate the degradation such changes could make by imagining what would happen to an Eliot poem if it were similarly regularized.

But it is the quality of her imagery that makes Emily Dickinson most clearly a forerunner of modern trends. Her conceits are reminiscent of those of Donne and the other early metaphysical poets in that widely dissimilar ideas are yoked together. They are even more reminiscent of those of the twentieth century in that they employ the most worldly images. As one critic put it, in comparing Dickinson and G. M. Hopkins, " . . . their poetry significantly is characterized by the use of vigorous metaphor, the incorporation of the difficult and unpoetic, and the use of dramatic shifts of tone."<sup>49</sup> Not only does she use figures that are not traditionally poetical in their connotations, but also those that would seem to be the most unpromising: in one poem she concentrates on the fly-specks on a



window, in another on a snowflake crossing a rut. She manages to find inspiration in the most unlikely places. Her characteristic metaphors are those that combine the infinitely small and the infinitely great. From that clash she extracts her comments on the immensities of life with which she deals. If a reader fails to see the real purpose of this collocation he may find the poetry obscure and "difficult."

Since Emily Dickinson's time this process of making the un-poetical poetical has gone much farther. Some even revel in the horrible or the macabre. That is not Emily Dickinson's way. She prefers to see to the essence of things by studying the minutiae of everyday life, the most ordinary and unpicturesque things in her environment. These things she puts side by side with the greatest and most sacrosanct ideas, and thereby creates the surprise which makes her poems dramatic. The trivial and the sublime frequently jostle each other in her poetry. She has affinities with the modern metaphysical movement, yet this distinctive quality of magnifying the small and insignificant to make it a revelation of the great and momentous is uniquely her own.

In a metaphysical poem the images are not merely ornaments which embellish the meaning. In a real sense they are the meaning. Without them the idea would not be complete. A good example is



the poem "A Route of Evanescence," quoted in Chapter II. The attributes of the hummingbird are not first explained and then illustrated with tropes of some sort. The description is implicit in the metaphors used; it is given only by means of metaphors. Such a comparison is not merely a decorative factor but, as Cleanth Brooks says, "The comparison is the poem in a structural sense."<sup>50</sup>

The high degree of dramatic intensity is a characteristic which most students of Dickinson's poetry have remarked upon.<sup>51</sup> It reveals itself in the many inherent contrasts and clashes between the conventional and the unconventional, the expected and the unexpected, the patterns and the vagaries. Her metres emphasize their irregularities by playing off variations against the basic patterns. So do her rhymes. Also, in the imagery the most profound and incomprehensible things are revealed by the most insignificant, earthly examples. This yearning for the security afforded by established tradition together with the realization that it is outmoded and inadequate for present needs is characteristic of her poetic method as well as of her attitude to the thought of her time.

In her own life she yearned for a comforting adherence to a religion to which most of her friends and family belonged. Yet she never formally accepted church membership. The revivalist enthusiasm of the time was not for her. Her relationship with God was a personal one:



Some keep the Sabbath going to Church--

I keep it, staying at Home.     *J324*

She needed the consolation of an abiding faith, yet never ceased to be a questioner. Her attitude is rather ironically summed up in this poem:

I never felt at Home--Below--

And in the Handsome Skies

I shall not feel at Home--I know--

I dont like Paradise--

Because it's Sunday--all the time--

And Recess--never comes--

And Eden'll be so lonesome

Bright Wednesday Afternoons--

If God could make a visit--

Or ever took a Nap--

So not to see us--but they say

Himself--a Telescope

Perennial behold us--

Myself would run away

From Him--and Holy Ghost--and All--

But there's the "Judgment Day"!     *J413*



The tensions accompanying a crumbling faith were as upsetting to her New England community as her private doubts were to her personally. New discoveries in science forced Puritan thinkers to re-examine some of their tenets which were founded on literal interpretations of Scripture.<sup>52</sup> Emily Dickinson's home town of Amherst was a conservative community, where any sort of free-thinking was frowned upon. Yet it could not entirely isolate itself from the new ideas that were abroad. The latter half of the nineteenth century was a time of change and tension. The stresses attendant upon a changing intellectual climate must have had a significant effect upon the mind of so original a thinker as Emily Dickinson, beset as she was with inner strife resulting from her own personal doubts.

It has been pointed out that metaphysical poetry flourishes in just such times of change and stress.<sup>53</sup> The early seventeenth century in England was a time of conflicts: between king and parliament, between Anglicans and Dissenters and Catholics. The new astronomy had shattered the ancient Christian conception of the world. This is all very reminiscent of the intellectual climate of the late nineteenth-century New England. Yet how much greater seem to be the stresses of the twentieth century when so many of our traditional concepts of religion, patriotism and economics are being questioned. It is not surprising, therefore, that modern poets, to an even greater extent than Dickinson or the seventeenth-century metaphysicals, should



turn to new modes of expression that would more accurately reflect the insecurity which thinking people feel. Ours is a metaphysical poetry which reflects the stresses of contemporary life just as Dickinson's reflects the stresses of her own life and times.

A poet's attempt to communicate this insecurity sometimes results in his being labelled difficult or obscure. The "difficulty" of modern verse stems from the same source as the irregularities which have caused so much critical comment on the works of Emily Dickinson. In both cases the authors were trying to express their underlying moods of doubt and uncertainty. Whatever may be the accusations brought against metaphysical poetry, it can never be said that it is dry, hackneyed, or sentimental. It springs from a basic dissatisfaction, which it seeks to express as dramatically and as originally as it can. It makes the form an integral part of the meaning and thus demands of the reader an acute awareness of the significance not only of every word with all its connotations but also of every device of form and arrangement. What may at first appear a mere idiosyncrasy of style can be seen to have its part to play in achieving the total effect, in making the entire poetic communication more rich and multifarious. Metaphysical poetry does not attempt to treat new subjects; it simply means a new approach to the ideas which thinking people have always pondered. It deals with human life, love, God, and eternity, just as poetry has always done. Emily Dickinson's distinctive contribution was to



approach these stupendous questions by having us look through the microscope of her keen perception. This achievement she herself describes in her cogent, dramatic way:

This was a Poet--It is That

Distills amazing sense

From ordinary Meanings--

And Attar so immense

From the familiar species

That perished by the Door--

We wonder it was not Ourselves

Arrested it--before--

Of Pictures, the Discloser--

The Poet--it is He--

Entitles Us--by Contrast--

To ceaseless Poverty--

Of Portion--so unconscious--

The Robbing--could not harm--

Himself--to Him--a Fortune--

Exterior--to Time-- J448

In her lifetime Emily Dickinson shunned fame and refused to allow more than a few poems to be published. "If fame belonged to me," she once said in a letter, "I could not escape her." Like



so many of her poetic utterances, that simple sentence turns out to have about it an uncanny prescience, for she did not escape fame, albeit it was posthumous. Ironically, though she ordered them destroyed her poems have made her famous. Ironically, too, her inimitable metaphysical style--which was judged as unfit for publication by the one professional critic whose opinion she sought --has made her an historic figure. It shows her to have been that rare thing in literary history, the shaper of new trends rather than the follower of old. There can be few today who would deny that her influence upon modern poetry has been considerable. Not only is she "the greatest woman poet who ever wrote in English,"<sup>54</sup> but also "America's greatest lyric poet."<sup>55</sup> Emily Dickinson was right: she could not escape fame.



FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 233.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. p. 75.

<sup>3</sup>"Strong Lines" are referred to by a number of writers, and are well explained in Helen Gardner's introduction to The Metaphysical Poets (Penguin Books D38, 1957).

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Johnson, "Cowley," Lives of the English Poets (London: Oxford University Press, 1906), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>8</sup>See especially Henry W. Wells, Introduction to Emily Dickinson (Chicago: Packard and Co., 1947), p. 128; and George F. Whicher, This Was A Poet (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1957), pp. 210 - 211.

<sup>9</sup>Whicher, op. cit., p. 208.

<sup>10</sup>Clay Hunt, Donne's Poetry (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954), p. 131

<sup>11</sup>H. J. C. Grierson, Metaphysical Poetry, Donne to Butler (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925).



<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. xxiii

<sup>13</sup>Pierre Legouis, Donne, the Craftsman (Paris: Henri Didier, 4 et 6, Rue de la Sorbonne, 1928), p. 12.

<sup>14</sup>T. S. Eliot, "The Music of Poetry," Selected Prose, ed. John Hayward (Penguin Books, No. 873, 1953), p. 64. This essay is the third W. P. Ker Memorial Lecture, delivered at Glasgow University, February 24, 1942.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., p. 65.

<sup>16</sup>For an interesting discussion of the difference between a strictly metrical and a dramatic reading of lines of Donne's poetry see J.B. Leishman, Metaphysical Poets (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 34.

<sup>17</sup>Norman Foerster and William Charvat, American Poetry and Prose (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1952), p. 606.

<sup>18</sup>Hunt, op. cit., pp.

<sup>19</sup>Hunt, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>20</sup>Helen Gardner, The Metaphysical Poets (Penguin Books D38, 1957), p. 22.

<sup>21</sup>Alice S. Brandenburg, "The Dynamic Image in Metaphysical Poetry," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, LVII (1942), 1040 - 1041.



<sup>22</sup>In this connection it seems significant that Darwin's Origin of Species was published in 1859, the year after Emily Dickinson began seriously to write poetry.

<sup>23</sup>See Whicher, op. cit., p. 20; Sona Raiziss, The Metaphysical Passion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1952), Ch. 5; and Helen C. White, The Metaphysical Poets (New York: MacMillan Co., 1936), p. 30 ff.

<sup>24</sup>This widely-held view is summed up by Sona Raiziss: "It has become anachronistic to write of simple nature, romantic love or patriotism. Only the bleak complexities of a T. S. Eliot satisfy the modern mind." (The Metaphysical Passion, p. 122)

<sup>25</sup>See "Rowing in Eden," the sixth chapter of Whicher's biography, for a sober account of the facts about this supposed love-affair, as far as they can now be ascertained.

<sup>26</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1955) p. 80.

<sup>27</sup>Louis Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p. 93.

<sup>28</sup>Austin Warren, Rage for Order (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup>John Crowe Ransom, The World's Body (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), Ch. 10.



<sup>30</sup>Yvor Winters In Defense of Reason (New York: Swallow Press and Wm. Morrow and Co., 1947) pp. 294 - 299.

<sup>31</sup>Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 93.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. 90.

<sup>33</sup>Henry Lanz, The Physical Basis of Rime (San Francisco: Stanford University Press, 1931), p. 39.

<sup>34</sup>Thornton Wilder, "Emily Dickinson," Atlantic Monthly, (Nov., 1952), p. 46.

<sup>35</sup>Ransom, op. cit., pp. 95 - 97.

<sup>36</sup>According to Whicher, p. 242, the only poem Emily Dickinson wrote in free verse is the lyric beginning "Victory comes late."

<sup>37</sup>Whicher, op. cit., p. 247.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 237.

<sup>39</sup>Whicher, op. cit., pp. 229 - 234.

<sup>40</sup>Isaac Watts (1674 - 1748) is best known as the composer of "O God Our Help in Ages Past" and "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

<sup>41</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, Emily Dickinson: An Interpretive Biography (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), p. 86.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., pp. 81 - 82



<sup>43</sup>Louis Untermeyer, Modern American Poetry (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1950), p. 90.

<sup>44</sup>Thomas H. Johnson, "Editing the Poems," The Poems of Emily Dickinson, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955), I, xlviii.

<sup>45</sup>Cleanth Brooks, The Well-Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), p. 69.

<sup>46</sup>The Spectator, No. 58.

<sup>47</sup>This quotation from one of Emily Dickinson's letters to Higginson is included in Johnson's edition of Poems, p. 713.

<sup>48</sup>Brooks, op. cit., pp. 96 - 113.

<sup>49</sup>Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill N. C. : University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 241.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>51</sup>See Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby, Literary History of the United States (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1955), pp. 908 - 916; Johnson, op. cit., pp. 81 - 82; and Whicher, op. cit., pp. 297 - 304.

<sup>52</sup>See Note 22.

<sup>53</sup>See Note 23.

<sup>54</sup>Untermeyer, op. cit., p. 94.

<sup>55</sup>Henry W. Wells, The American Way of Poetry (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), p. 233.



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